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THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED COLLEGE STUDENTS THROUGH
CRITICAL EVOCATIVE PORTRAITURE

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Erica García

March 2015

Advisor: Susan Korach, EdD

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Title: THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDOCUMENTED COLLEGE STUDENTS
THROUGH CRITICAL EVOCATIVE PORTRAITURE

Advisor: Susan Korach, EdD

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the college experiences of five undocumented students. Using data from three in-depth interviews, the study sought to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Rendón's (1994) theory of student validation provided the framework for the study. The qualitative method of critical evocative portraiture (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2013) was used to collect, analyze and present the data. Congruent with the methodology, the researcher constructed a critical evocative portrait of each of the participants. The portraits provide a full picture of the participants, and honor the complexity and powerful experiences of undocumented students. The findings revealed that academic and interpersonal validation overpowered adverse circumstances, and that awareness of legal status and the impact on the future developed a drive and passion for social change.

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I dedicate this work to my daughters whom I love with all my heart,

Jalitza and Nicole.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

By 2050, Hispanics will make up 29% of the United States population compared to 14% in 2005 (Passel & Cohn, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and nearly one in five Americans, 19%, will be foreign born compared to 12% in 2005. The immigrant youth will represent approximately one-third of all children in the United States (Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011). In 2005, the undocumented population accounted for about 30% of the foreign born; furthermore, immigrants from Mexico accounted for 56% of the undocumented population, and about 22% from the rest of Latin America. Despite a recent decline in the undocumented population (Passel & Cohn, 2008b; Preston, 2012), particularly from Mexico, the current undocumented immigrant population living in the United States is about 10.8 million of which over 1.3 million are minors (Varela, 2011).

In Colorado, the undocumented population has grown enormously, placing it as one of the states with the highest concentrations of undocumented immigrants (Bell Policy Center, 2005). It is estimated the undocumented immigrant population represents 40-49% of the total foreign-born population in Colorado, and between 200,000 and 250,000 undocumented immigrants lived in the state during 2002-2004 (Bell Policy Center, 2005).

The undocumented Hispanic population faces unique challenges that differ from other undocumented immigrants. For example, some recently implemented policies and laws that, according to the National Immigration Law Center (2012), seem to be based not solely on legal status but also on racial profiling that directly targets this group. Some interpret that the Alabama enactment of HB 56 has created a hostile environment as law enforcement and even school officials are encouraged to discriminate based on an individual's appearance and perceived ethnicity (National Immigration Law Center, 2012). Another well-known example is Arizona's SB 1070, in which the Supreme Court's ruling allows Arizona's enforcement officers to ask for proof of legal status if they suspect a person is undocumented (Lofholm, 2012; National Immigration Law Center, 2010). The individual's appearance of Hispanic descent would be probable cause while a White undocumented immigrant might not be questioned. The passage of the Arizona legislation revealed a bias in Colorado politics when both main political parties declared a victory when the Supreme Court's decision was made public (Lofholm, 2012). While policy makers and citizens debate the standing and rights of undocumented immigrants, it is the sub-group of undocumented students who wind up in the middle of this adult tug of war.

For undocumented students, college access and educational attainment are among the most predominant challenges they face as adolescents and young adults (Baum & Flores, 2011). While approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrant students graduate annually from the nation's high schools (American Immigration Council, 2010), only a limited number have the opportunity to access—and most importantly complete—college. Many of these students may not have the information or resources needed to

access post-secondary education, or the financial means to pay for it. Roughly, 15% of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have earned a college degree, which is less than half of the legal immigrants and Whites (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Similarly, national trends indicate an expanding college enrollment and attainment gap between Whites and Hispanics in general (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

For those students who are able to overcome the barriers to college access, they still must face college and universities originally designed by and for the privileged that continue to function as such even when student populations are becoming more diverse (Rendón, 1994). The old uniform profile of college students is long gone; today's student body is "a tapestry of differentiation in social background, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, lifestyle, and sexual orientation" (Rendón, 1994, p. 33).

Problem Statement

Despite the increase of Hispanic students in the United States educational system, with Hispanics accounting for 23.9% of the Pre-K through 12th grade public school enrollment, the number of successful Hispanic college graduates is not being reflected (Fry & Lopez, 2012). The underrepresentation of Hispanic college graduates indicates a need for research.

Carrasquillo (2000) and Zarate and Burciaga (2010) assert that Hispanics are less prepared for college in comparison to their White peers because they are less likely to have taken college preparation or advanced placement courses in high school that often offer an advantage in grade point average and college credit. Thus, Hispanics have fewer opportunities to prepare for access to college and academic success than Whites. Undocumented students face a multitude of challenges that obstruct their journey to and

through college, including serious barriers such as denied access to financial aid assistance, and an academy that is unable to meet the needs of today's rich, diverse student population.

The current scenario of most post-secondary institutions favors traditional students who come from families with a well-established college-going culture (Rendón, 1994). Examples of such scenarios include student activities and organizations geared towards the needs of traditional students; curriculum that is centered in the dominant, Euro-cultures and excludes contributions of minorities; and a competitive versus collaborative environment, to name a few (Rendón, 1994).

Research clearly documents the challenges for Hispanic students, and the status of being an undocumented student adds an additional burden (Olivas, 2004; Baum & Flores, 2011). The undocumented subgroup is at a greater disadvantage due to legal status, making the dream of a college education that will prepare students for the future nearly unattainable. Nevertheless, despite the legal and educational uncertainties, undocumented students are here to stay, and some of them, such as the participants in this study, have been successful in accessing and persisting through college (Noguera, 2006). As such, one could argue that proactively providing undocumented students college access and the supports to succeed, the opportunity to maintain a strong competitive economy increases through improving the academic preparation of future generations, and raising the caliber of a large segment of the future workforce (Museus & Quaye, 2009; National Immigration Law Center, 2012; Bell Policy Center, 2005, 2013).

Study Significance

The academic literature that focuses on immigrant students and their college success is fairly limited (Conway, 2009), and research on the unique situation of undocumented students is even more limited (Dozier, 2001; Flores, 2003; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes, 2009). Since there are currently over one million undocumented children in the United States (Fry & Passel, 2009; Varela, 2011), research regarding the in- and out-of-class experiences of undocumented students that lead to college persistence and attainment of a college degree can be beneficial to educational leaders. Because the disparity in educational attainment between White and Hispanic students in general is substantial (Chavez, & Maestas-Flores, 1991; Kezar & Eckel, 2007), most of the extant research on undocumented students is focused on the additional challenges they face due to their legal status (Barragan, 2009; Perez et al., 2009), and less research has been conducted with undocumented students who have persisted through college. Therefore, sharing the educational experiences of students who have achieved academic success has the potential to inform policy and programming that might stimulate the academic growth of this population for post-secondary institutions in particular.

Purpose of the Study

The current literature contains limited research regarding undocumented students who are persistent and successful in attaining a college degree in spite of the obstacles inherent to an undocumented status. The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's

degree. This study presented insights about the in- and out-of-class experiences that validated a group of undocumented students, thus impacting their college persistence. Through their detailed stories of how they have succeeded in their college education, the study attempted to identify those institutional procedures, processes, and supports that positively impact retention and degree attainment.

Research Questions

The study focused on undocumented Hispanic students' educational and life experiences that contributed to their college persistence. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do undocumented students' in-class experiences, such as curriculum, classroom, and faculty interactions, influence their college persistence?
2. How do undocumented students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, influence their college persistence?

In addition to the systems college students have to navigate, such as the college admissions process and financial aid, undocumented Hispanic students might encounter other academic barriers such as college activities, curriculum, and an overall learning environment that does not support nontraditional students such as those in this group. Most importantly, these experiences shed light on what secondary and post-secondary institutions could do to develop a “new model of student learning and development” that will better serve the needs of undocumented students. Moreover, the experiences of these Colorado undocumented college students or graduates may represent the stories of many Hispanic undocumented students who are currently in the United States K-12 school

system or in their first year of college, and are often underrepresented or underserved (Lee, 1991; Pender, 2010; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

Overview of the Methodology

The research methodology used for the study was critical evocative portraiture, a qualitative approach developed by Lyman, Lazaridou, and Strachan (2012, 2013). This innovative approach is mainly grounded in the methodology of portraiture as conceptualized by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005), portraiture has the ability to document the “beautiful and the ugly experiences” that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships (p. 9). Portraiture is a phenomenological approach that is a useful methodology for sharing the human experience. In portraiture, the detailed stories are told in order to illuminate more general phenomena; a subtle nuance of voice or posture that reveals a critical attitude. In this approach, words are chosen to create sensations that evoke visions for the reader (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Portraiture is a genre whose methods are shaped by empirical and aesthetic dimensions, whose descriptions are often penetrating and personal, whose goals include generous and tough scrutiny. It is a sensitive kind of work that requires the perceptivity and skill of a practiced observer and the empathy and care of a clinician. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 369)

Overview of the Framework

Early student persistence models and literature are predominately focused on White, upper-middle-class students from college-educated households (Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Rendón’s (1994) model of student validation originates in the need to help post-secondary institutions change their outdated ideas based on traditional students, and to build a new model of student learning and development that considers the needs

and strengths of nontraditional students supporting student persistence (Rendón, 1994).

This study used Rendón's model of student validation to explore the life and educational experiences of five undocumented students, and how such experiences contribute to their persistence to obtain a bachelor's degree. The following are the six elements of Rendón's student validation model (1994):

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self-worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable.
3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in and out of class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be significant others, family members, friends, and college staff.
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.
6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class (p. 44-45).

Assumptions and Limitations

A major limitation of the study is the generalizability even when the purpose of the study is not generalization, but rather to depict the unique experiences of a small

group of undocumented students. Another possible limitation is that students' responses may be influenced by external factors such as fear of exposure of identity, despite the anonymity and confidentiality measures taken by the researcher. As such, an assumption about the research design is that participants responded openly, honestly, and as accurately as possible to the interview questions. Last, social desirability may play a role in influencing students to answer what they feel the researcher or other external individuals would want to hear.

Researcher Perspective

The subjectivity of the researcher and her perspective is a factor in conducting this study. The researcher's personal experience can be perceived as both an asset and a limitation. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) assert, "The researcher brings her own history—familial, cultural, ideological, and educational—to the inquiry. Her perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by these profound developmental and autobiographical experiences" (p. 95). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) further asserts that "the identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story" (p. 11). Centered on these assertions, the researcher's background can be deemed as an asset as opposed to a bias.

Definition of Terms

These are the operational definitions of key terms as used in the study.

Academic Persistence. For the purpose of this study, academic persistence or student persistence refers to when a student successfully attains a college degree or is successfully completing the last year before completion of all requirements to attain a college degree.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. Undocumented immigrants ages 15 to 30 who arrived to the United States before age 16 may qualify for deferred action if: (a) they have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007; (b) they were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012; (c) they are enrolled in school, have a high school diploma or a GED, or have been honorably discharged from the military or Coast Guard by the time of their application; and (d) they have not been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor offense, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not present a threat to national security or public safety. Undocumented immigrants who meet these criteria may apply for a deferred action permit that shields them from deportation for two years and also may potentially qualify them for work authorization. At the expiration of the two-year deferred action period, program beneficiaries can apply for a two-year renewal, pending a review of their case. According to DHS, renewals will be issued in two-year increments (Passel & Lopez, 2012).

Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) Program. A new program that will allow undocumented people who have a United States citizen or lawful permanent resident son or daughter to apply for work authorization and protection from deportation, if the person has been in the United States since January 1, 2010. The existing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program will be expanded and now will cover people who entered the United States before their sixteenth birthday and have lived continuously in the United States since January 1, 2010. People who were “aged out” of DACA by being older than age 31 on June 15, 2012, are now eligible to apply, regardless of how old they are now. Certain spouses and children of lawful

permanent residents, as well as adult children of U.S. citizens, applying for lawful permanent resident (“green card”) status through a consulate abroad, may be able to get advance approval before leaving the United States through a waiver process.

DREAM Act. A bill first proposed in 2001 that would provide a path for undocumented students to obtain resident status. The requirements are: (a) entry into the United States before age 16; (b) continuous presence in the United States for five years prior to the bill’s enactment; (c) receipt of a high school diploma or its equivalent (i.e., a GED); and (d) demonstration of good moral character. The DREAM Act would enable undocumented high school graduates to apply for conditional status, which would authorize them for up to six years of legal residence. During the six-year period, the student would be required to attend college and graduate, or serve in the United States military for at least two years. Students meeting these requirements would be granted permanent residency at the end of the six-year period (Yates, 2004 as cited in Perez, 2012).

FAFSA. FAFSA is an acronym that stands for "Free Application for Federal Student Aid." It is the basic form that must be filled out for all students who wish to participate in Federal student aid programs such as Stafford and Perkins loans, as well as Pell Grants.

Hispanic or Latino. The federal government defines *Hispanic* or *Latino* as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is important to note that many Latinos prefer to identify themselves by their nationality, as experienced by the researcher, instead of a label such as Latino or Hispanic that clusters them with many

other groups. In this study, students will be asked how they choose to identify themselves through their personal portraits; however, the term *Hispanic* will still be utilized throughout the study.

Residency and Domicile. Residency is the act of establishing and maintaining residence in a given place. Colorado states that requirements for establishing residency are whichever of the following occurs first: (1) to own or operate a business in Colorado, (2) to be gainfully employed in Colorado, or (3) to reside in Colorado for 90 consecutive days (www.colorado.gov/revenue). To establish domicile, students must prove two elements: (1) residence and (2) an intention to make that residence their permanent, fixed abode. A person may maintain more than one residence, but only one domicile (Olivas, 2004).

Senate Bill 33- Colorado ASSET. The bill allows a student, other than certain foreign students or trainees defined in federal law, to be classified as an unsubsidized in-state student for tuition purposes so long as the student: (1) attended a public or private high school in Colorado for three or more years immediately preceding the date the student graduated from a Colorado high school or earned a general educational development certificate in Colorado; and (2) is admitted to an institution of higher education in Colorado within 12 months after graduating from high school or earning a certificate (American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado).

Traditional Student. A student who comes from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and is predominantly White, although some minority students fit this category (Rendón, 1994).

Undocumented Student. An undocumented student is a foreign national who: (a) entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documents; or (b) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then violated the terms of his or her status and remained in the United States without authorization (National Immigration Law Center, 2009).

Validation. “Active intervention from an in- or out-of-class agent who lends a helping hand or who initiates an action that affirms students as being capable of learning” (Rendón, 1994, p. 294).

White Privilege. White privilege refers to the myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the dominant race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Summary

This study explored the in- and out-of-class experiences of academic and interpersonal validation that influenced a small group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a college degree. This chapter provided the background, purpose, and significance, as well as the main research questions of the study. The chapter also introduced the study’s framework, Rendón’s (1994) model of student validation, which was utilized to guide the study and to analyze the collected data. The next chapter presents an in-depth literature review that will focus on: Race, immigration, and educational opportunity, Hispanic and undocumented students and college access; undocumented students in higher education; and political climate, and policy impacting undocumented students.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

The focus of this chapter is to present the framework that guided this study, and to present an overview of the literature regarding undocumented students. While the undocumented population is composed of various ethnic groups, for the purpose of this study, the literature review focuses on undocumented Hispanic students. The review includes the following topics: Race, immigration, and educational opportunity; Hispanic and undocumented students in the United States educational system; undocumented students and college access; undocumented students in higher education; and political climate, and policy impacting undocumented students. The participants in the study situated their experiences within a broader context of social reform and student activism. These research areas emerged as significant to the study. The chapter concludes with literature on social reform and student activism.

Framework

More than half of all students who enter a post-secondary institution fail to succeed in obtaining a bachelor's degree within six years (Tinto, 1993). The rate of White student failure is approximately 33%, and over 50% for minority populations such as African Americans and Latinos (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). These racial and ethnic

disparities can be ameliorated not only by ensuring access to post-secondary education, but most importantly, by providing opportunities and supports to succeed in college for increasingly diverse student populations (Museus & Quaye, 2009). As such, in order for educational institutions, particularly post-secondary, to effectively serve diverse populations, “they must understand how to foster success among students of color” (Museus & Quaye, 2009, p. 68), and create “new policies and practices that are tailored to a new student majority that bears little resemblance to the student of days gone by” (Rendón, 1994, p. 45).

Over the last three decades, numerous perspectives have been offered to help understand minority (nontraditional) student persistence (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, 2002; Tierney, 1992, 1999; Tinto, 1987, 1993). One of those perspectives, Rendón’s (1994) cultural perspective of college persistence, is promising because it focuses on creating a new model of teaching and learning that validates culturally diverse students. Rendón’s model of student validation will be used as the framework for this study. However, a brief review of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) model of student departure as well as critiques to his work is imperative to establish the significance of Rendón’s elements of validation in understanding and supporting minority students’ college persistence.

Tinto’s Theory of Departure. Tinto’s (1975) original theory of departure, produced a theoretical model of attrition that includes the following components:

- (a) pre-entry attributes such as (prior schooling and family background); (b) goals/commitment (student aspirations and institutional goals); (c) institutional

experiences (academics, faculty interaction, co-curricular involvement, and peer group interaction); (d) integration (academic and social); (e) goals/commitment (intentions and external commitments); and (f) outcome (departure decision – graduate, transfer, dropout). (Metz, 2002, p. 3)

Tinto began the development of his departure theory by turning to the field of social anthropology studies, predominantly to the work of Van Gennep (1960). Van Gennep's studies of rituals and ceremonies including those around birth, marriage, death, and passage to adulthood are based on the process of establishing membership in traditional societies. According to Van Gennep (as cited in Tinto, 1975; 1987), each of the stages (separation, transition, and incorporation) in the rites of passages theory can be applied to a variety of situations, particularly those that involve the movement of a person or group from one place to another. Based on Van Gennep's theory, a person or group separates from a place, physically or ceremoniously, transitions to the new place, and then incorporates to the new place or community (Tinto, 1975; 1987). Van Gennep states that there is a period of "normlessness" from the individual's separation until the integration to the new setting; as such, the rituals and ceremonies are essential in the rites of passage to serve as both social and therapeutic functions (Tinto, 1987; 1993; Van Gennep, 1960). Tinto applies Van Gennep's theory to student persistence because, in a way, students entering college are separating from and leaving behind family, community, and former peers, joining the new college community and encountering problems of adjustment, which well exemplify "the difference between continued persistence and early departure" (Tinto 1987, p. 94). Early departure, however, cannot solely be attributed to the actual change in membership, but additionally to the personality of the individual or of the institution of the new membership (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993) applied conceptual frameworks such as Durkheim's theory of egotistical suicide, the most analogous to Tinto's thinking about institutional departure from higher education, which contributed to his developing theory (Bean, 1988; Tinto, 1987). According to Durkheim's theory of suicide, egotistical suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are not sufficiently integrated into society. Spady (1970) argued that when the college system is viewed as a social system with its own values and social structure, student dropout is in this sense equivalent to that of suicide from the wider society. The social conditions that affect dropout from the social system of a college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the wider society. In a college system, the social and academic aspects are part of the college integration, and both are essential to successful integration that can lead to student retention (Spady, 1970). This posture in Tinto's theory has been highly criticized for its cultural bias and inadequacy in explaining the departure of minority students (Tierney, 1992, 1999).

Tinto (1975) claims that in order to develop a theoretical model of dropout from college that seeks to explain the longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to a variety of forms of persistent or non-persistent behavior, the theory must not only include background characteristics of individuals (e.g., high school experiences, race, and ability) but also expectation and motivational attributes (i.e., career expectation, and motivation for academic achievement) (Tinto, 1975). Moreover, Tinto claims that if all factors are equal, it can be anticipated that the level of student commitment towards goals would be the determining factor in student persistence. Expanding on this work, Tinto acknowledges

the need to include additional ethnographic information such as background in his conceptual model of persistence. In addition, Tinto's work revision in 1987 led to the integration of other persistence variables such as psychological, societal, economic, organizational, and interaction factors (Metz, 2002). Revisions to his previous work positing factors that affect ethnic minorities do not necessarily differ in number or type, but rather in the intensity of the impact on minority students' persistence. Hence, minority students have a greater struggle with academic demands, integration into the social and support structures of the institution, and accessing financial resources (Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, Tinto argues that individuals of minority backgrounds and/or from homes of high poverty are more likely to have difficulties during their college transition than students who come from families who have experienced college (Tinto, 1987). In fact, Tinto's theory exemplifies the assimilation model that has been pervasive in much sociological scholarship on education (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012); the model, according to Muñoz and Maldonado (2012), presumes that for Hispanics as well as for other minority populations, college success hinges on assimilation to the dominant (White) culture.

Critiques to Tinto's Theory of Departure. Tierney (1999) postulates that although Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory has helped advance knowledge regarding student college persistence, including minority students, expecting college students to sever ties with their traditional cultural heritages places an unnecessary burden on culturally diverse students to assimilate to their respective campus' environments, rather than "recognizing an institutional responsibility to facilitate those students' socialization" (Museus &

Quaye, 2009, p. 70). Furthermore, Tinto suggests students must divorce themselves from their previous relationships (e.g., culture, family); they must figuratively “kill off” their former selves in order to successfully integrate into college life. In other words, Tinto suggests that students abandon their ethnic identities to succeed on predominantly White campuses, overlooking the history of ethnic oppression and discrimination in the United States (Tierney, 1999). Inversely, Tierney places great emphasis on “cultural integrity,” which is focused on the affirmation of students’ cultural identities and the positive integration of their ethnic backgrounds in all institutions’ teaching and learning activities. As such, Tierney (1999) suggests Tinto’s theory “misses the mark for minority students” (p. 80).

According to Museus and Quaye (2009), the research of factors that affect college student adjustment and persistence has expanded greatly; as such, researchers are cognizant of the need to move beyond existing culturally biased frameworks and adopt models that better apply to more diverse college students. Museus and Quaye (2009) examined and revised Kuh and Love’s (2000) cultural propositions to generate a new intercultural perspective of ethnic minority college student persistence, from which they offered eight new emergent revised intercultural propositions that include both collective (e.g., ethnic organizations within the college) and individual (culture of origin) cultural agents, asserting they are both important factors in student college experiences. Their eighth proposition posits that ethnic minority undergraduates are more likely to succeed if the campus cultural agents emphasize achievement, value attainment, and validate their cultural heritages.

Rendón's Theory of Student Validation. Rendón's (1994) elements of student validation definition provided the framework for this study. Validation refers to:

The intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student and academic affairs staff, family members, and peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment. (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12)

As such, validation is said to help students acquire confidence and develop an "I can do it" attitude. Furthermore, validation helps students "believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just as a student" (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 15).

According to Rendón, validation may be said to have the following six elements:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self-worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable.
3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in and out of class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be significant others, family members, friends, and college staff.
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.

6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class (p. 44-45).

There are two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation takes place when in- and out-of-class agents take action to help students believe they can be successful as college students (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). In-class validation refers to specific faculty-initiated actions of an academic nature such as, demonstrating a genuine concern for teaching students, treating students equally, structuring learning experiences that allow students to trust their competence to learn, and “designing activities where students can witness themselves as powerful learners” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 19). Out-of-class academic validations plays a key role in student success, particularly in the absence of in-class validation. Out-of-class validating agents include family, peers, and friends.

In- class and out-of class interpersonal validation are those actions that foster students' personal and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). In the classroom, this translates into faculty affirming students as persons and not just as students. For instance, faculty members build caring and supportive relationships with students, and allow students to validate each other and build supportive networks (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). The impact of out-of-class interpersonal validation is greatly significant, especially for those students who may experience invalidation in the classroom. Consistent positive feedback, support and encouragement by out-of-class agents is invaluable for nontraditional students.

Many nontraditional college students need a sense of direction and guidance, but not in a patronizing way (Rendón, 2002). These students do not succeed well in what Rendón (2002) refers to “an invalidating, sterile, fiercely competitive context for learning” that still exists in many present-day college classrooms (p. 644). Rendón (1994) claims that colleges and universities originally designed by and for the privileged have continued to operate as such, favoring traditional students and making it difficult for nontraditional students to persist. This is consistent with Tinto (1987), who argues that individuals of minority backgrounds and/or from homes of high poverty are more likely to have difficulties during their college transition than students who come from families who have experienced college. Moreover, Rendón (1994, 2006) claims the curriculum is Euro-centered and for the most part excludes, silences, or marginalizes the contributions of minority populations, and the learning environment encourages competition as opposed to collaboration. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why “students who do not fit the traditional student profile can feel alienated and intimidated by today’s college culture” (Rendón, 1994, p.34). Tinto (1993) dissents claiming that factors affecting ethnic minorities do not necessarily differ in number or type, but rather in the intensity of the impact on these minority students’ persistence. Furthermore, Tinto, according to Tierney (1999), implicitly suggests, “such students must assimilate to the cultural mainstream and abandon their ethnic identities to succeed on predominantly White campuses” (p. 80). However, Rendón urges the culture of the academy to make the changes necessary to meet the needs of today’s diverse, nontraditional student population and support them as they face the complex issues of college institutions. Rendón (1994)

argues that when faculty members of the campus community reach out to nontraditional students with genuine concern and validate their ability to be successful, these students can be transformed into “powerful learners” (p. 39).

According to Rendón’s (1994) findings, nontraditional students, which include minorities, often express doubt, as well as the need to be confirmed and to find structure even when they come into college expecting to fail. As such, students of ethnic minority are in greatest need of validation (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Garza, 1996, Rendón & Muñoz, 2011), particularly because validation may be the missing link to involvement, perhaps the prerequisite to student involvement (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). Rendón (1994) suggested specific ways in which institutions can foster validating classroom environments as well as a validating college environment or a “therapeutic learning community” (p. 50). To create validating classroom experiences, she suggests: (a) classroom practices (students encouraged to voice their opinions, inclusion of contributions of women and minorities in the curriculum, use of active learning techniques); (b) faculty-student interpersonal interaction (praise for students, faculty partnering with students in seeking knowledge); (c) peer interaction facilitated by faculty (students working in teams); and (d) appreciation of students’ abilities and strengths (recognition of students as a source of knowledge, students seen as potentially powerful learners). To promote a validating college environment, she encourages: (a) proactive outreach to students by faculty and staff (being available, interacting at athletic and social events); (b) promoting personal and cultural pride (through events, student organizations, and activities); (c) encouragement of family involvement at the college; (d) opportunities

for mutual assistance among peers; and (e) messages that students of all backgrounds are valued (as cited in Barnett, 2006, p. 40).

Rendón's (1994) view of student validation as critical for ethnic minority students' continued involvement in college is congruent with Tierney's (1999) notion of cultural integrity, and Museus and Quaye's (2009) proposition on the significance of cultural agents to validate students' cultural identities. As stated in Rendón's elements of validation, both in- and out-of-class interpersonal validation are essential to student college persistence and success. Rendón and Garza (1996) contend that minority students will persist if post-secondary institutions engage in practicing forms of student validation. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) theorize "for many low-income, first-generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students towards acknowledgement of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality" (p. 17). Similarly, Museus and Quaye (2009) describe the importance of both collective and individual intercultural agents, and Tinto stresses the importance of collective cultural agents in predicting persistence of college students. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that it is the informal, out-of-class interactions with other students and faculty members, and participation in extracurricular activities, that greatly influence student learning and attitude towards learning. Nora and Cabrera (1996) developed a model proposing the experiences of the student at his or her institution are reflected in both a social (e.g., experiences with peers) and an academic domain (e.g., experiences with academic staff).

Race, Immigration, and Educational Opportunity

Undocumented Hispanic population. Demographic estimates suggest there were approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States in 2008 (Passel and Cohen, 2009). Moreover, it is estimated that 7 million immigrants originate from Mexico, representing the largest segment of the undocumented population.

Unquestionably, the number of undocumented immigrants coming to the United States has been steadily increasing for the last couple of decades. In fact, Passel (2006) states the growth of the undocumented population has an average increase of 500,000 per year, accounting for about 30% of the foreign-born population in 2005; immigrants from Mexico account for 56% of the undocumented population, and immigrants from the rest of Latin America make up about 22% (Passel, 2006). According to Varela (2011), the undocumented immigrant population is about 10.8 million, of which over 1.3 million are minors. The Pew Hispanic Center (2008) estimates this number to be approximately 11.9 million. Due to the hermetic nature of the population, it is difficult to accurately account for all members of this group. It would be of no surprise if this number were higher because there are many undocumented immigrants who keep their status fully undisclosed.

Recent contradicting statements indicate the undocumented population, particularly from Mexico, is no longer on the rise but rather decreasing. For the first time in the last 30 or 40 years, the population of undocumented immigrants from Mexico is declining (Preston, 2012). According to Preston (2012), factors contributing to the phenomenon include high unemployment in the United States, heightened border

enforcement, increased deportations, and perhaps anti-immigrant statutes. Most immigrant families are willing to endure these factors in hopes that their school-aged children can have a better education, and perhaps one day obtain their residency. The journey to this goal begins from the moment families make the decision to leave their home country; despite the perilous situation, the need to feed their children and to build a brighter future for them is greater than their fears (Anguiano & Lopez, 2012). According to Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi & Suarez-Orozco (2011), many of these families are growing deep roots in the United States. Yet the implications of an undocumented status, which include “restricting access to some of the most important pathways to adult well-being and productivity. . .” (p. 462), pose great challenges for this population making the promise of a brighter future an “elusive mirage” (Suarez-Orozco, et al., 2011).

Challenges for the undocumented population. Structural barriers to successful integration into United States society are evident among undocumented immigrants because they are often denied basic access to social rights such as voting, health services and driving (Gonzales, 2009; Perez, 2009). For instance, most states currently do not issue drivers’ licenses to individuals without a social security number, thus impacting undocumented Hispanics who cannot obtain one due to their legal status. Undocumented youth in particular, often speak about the barrier to drive, as this is one of the first palpable effects of an undocumented status (Perez, 2009).

Undocumented Hispanic immigrants face unique challenges that differ from other immigrants. Policies and laws based on racial profiling directly target Hispanics, as it

appears to be the case with SB 170, which allows Arizona's police enforcement officers to ask for proof of legal status if they suspect a person is undocumented (Lofholm, 2012; National Immigration Law Center, 2010). The case of Arizona's Wilson Four also exemplifies this issue; Wilson Charter High School students in Phoenix were targeted by immigration officials at the Canadian border simply because of their Hispanic appearance (Olivas, 2004). For these reasons, deportation is a constant fear for undocumented immigrants and even for their relatives who are documented (Arbona, Olvera, Rodriguez, Hagan, Linares & Wiesner, 2010; Lopez & Lopez, 2010). This apprehension is not unfounded since these policies have exacerbated their fear, creating a restrictive and hostile environment for the members of this population (National Immigration Law Center, 2012).

In the past, Colorado has had a number of attempts to pass legislative initiatives that negatively impact undocumented individuals, particularly Hispanics, such as those reported by the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition-CIRC, (2012): the SAFE Act Bill, which makes the presence of undocumented immigrants a federal crime; and SB11-054: Authority to Arrest Unlawful Aliens, which allows law enforcement agencies to arrest a person without a warrant if the officer has probable cause to believe the person is subject to a removal order by an immigrant court, among other criteria. However, Colorado has had recent policy changes that benefit the undocumented population, for instance, the Colorado Road and Community Safety Act, SB-251. As of August 2014, this bill allows issuance of licenses to Colorado residents who cannot demonstrate legal status (Nicholson, 2014). Also, the Colorado ASSET bill, SB-33, which benefits Colorado

undocumented high school graduates by providing in-state tuition rates, was finally signed into law on April 2013 (Cotton, 2013).

Some believe that bills such as the Colorado ASSET, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, or policies such as Deferred Action (temporary legal status), could eliminate the major impediments to college access for undocumented students, and that if undocumented students did not have such impediments, more of them would attend college. Flores and Chapa's (2009) study revealed that undocumented students residing in states with in-state tuition were 19% more likely to attend college. While policies may remove technical barriers, other factors, such as the fear of being unmasked as undocumented individuals and deported to their country of birth, may still drive many actions of undocumented Hispanic students.

Hispanic and Undocumented Students in the United States Educational System

Until 1960, immigration from Europe dominated the flows of immigrants to the United States. After this point, immigration from Europe declined drastically as the immigration from Latin America saw a drastic increase (Saenz & Murga, 2011). Immigration has played a key role in the growth of the Hispanic population over the last several decades, and the Hispanic population now serves as the engine of the population change in the United States (Saenz & Murga, 2011). According to Saenz and Murga (2011), more than one million people have emigrated from Latin America to the United States each decade since the 1960s with the highest numbers in the 1980s (3.5 million) and the 1990s (4.3 million). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2010) argue these

immigrants are working individuals who are not only here to stay but are “growing roots” in the American land.

The two fastest growing populations in the United States are Hispanics and Asians. Hispanics are projected to increase by 167% from 49.7 million in 2010 to 132.8 million in 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). This means that by 2050, Hispanics could account for three of every 10 persons in the United States.

The immigrant Hispanic youth is a significant population present in the United States (Noguera, 2006). Noguera (2006) notes that many of the Hispanic youth have established themselves in the United States, and are here to stay. In contrast to their parents, immigrant Hispanic youth feel the United States is their home and, for some, the only homeland they know. Nevertheless, there are still some young Hispanic immigrants who are constantly torn between two worlds, feeling American in certain aspects, yet strongly attached to their countries of origin (Noguera, 2006).

Saenz and Murga (2011) report that children of color, including Hispanics, start their educational careers lagging significantly behind in comparison to their White counterparts; they are behind in letter recognition, proficiency in numbers and shapes, and proficiency in color knowledge at age four. These educational disparities at an early age continue all the way to high school, playing a major role in student desertion rate. As a result, Hispanics continue to lag significantly behind with respect to educational attainment.

In the case *Plyler v. Doe*, the Court held that undocumented children are entitled to state-funded primary and secondary education (Plyler vs. Doe, 1982). Even though this

court decision guarantees a quality free public education, the educational outlook for undocumented students of Hispanic heritage does not seem very promising. Hispanics are often overrepresented in risk factors such as low family income, “C” or lower grade point average, teen pregnancy, and low parental education. Hispanics in the United States will nearly triple the current number by the year 2050, accounting for more than 25% of the total population (Lopez & Lopez, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Lopez and Lopez (2010) state that by 2020 more than one in five children under 18 years of age will be of Hispanic origin. Between 1972 and 2000 the overall percentage of minority students in public schools increased by 17%, and 10% of the increase was attributed to Hispanics. However, Hispanics continue to have the highest school desertion rates, 28%, in comparison to African Americans, accounting for 13% or White students with 7%. Similar discrepancies exist in high school completion rates and achievement on standardized testing (Lopez & Lopez, 2010).

Undocumented Students and College Access

Undocumented students face a multitude of barriers to college access such as right to admission, residency and domicile requirements, out-of-state tuition rates, little or no financial aid, among others (Barragan, 2009; Bell Policy Center, 2005; Diaz-Strong, Gomez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011; Lopez & Lopez, 2010; Olivas, 2004; Palmer, 2011; Perez, 2012; Saenz & Murga, 2011; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

The Plyler v. Doe (1982) Supreme Court decision addressed the educational rights of students attending primary and secondary schools, but it did not address state or federal actions regarding post-secondary access for undocumented students (Olivas,

2004). In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). IIRIRA's section 505 prohibits states from extending post-secondary education benefits such as in-state tuition to undocumented residents. As such, undocumented students are not eligible for post-secondary benefits that are provided to legal residents. Although there are no federal laws that deny undocumented students admission to higher education institutions, individual states may deny them admission, as it is the case with the state of South Carolina (Olivas, 2008; Russell, 2011). This worst-case scenario would mean that even the most talented, hardworking, and academically proficient student might be prevented from reaching his or her maximum academic potential simply because this student does not have legal status.

As difficult as it is to navigate the application and admission process, the more daunting process is to navigate establishing residency or domicile. This is sometimes a difficult concept for United States citizens to comprehend, let alone immigrants. Similarly, dealing constantly with issues of immigration and nationality laws, which almost always work against immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants (Olivas, 2004), can be challenging. According to Olivas (1995), states can also individually enact a tuition scheme to differentiate between residents and nonresidents, who pay substantial tuition differentials. Furthermore, in many states, this mechanism can be used to deny undocumented students—even those who meet all the traditional tests for establishing domiciles—the opportunity to pay in-state tuition. In-state and out-of-state tuition can differ as much as six to one; states have the jurisdiction over the charges for in- and out-of-state tuition rates just as they do with the criteria to establish residency (Olivas, 1995).

In many instances, undocumented students pay higher tuition rates, even if they have lived in a state for many years. They are ineligible for federal financial aid, work-study programs, student loans, and most scholarships (Perez et al., 2009). In Colorado, it was not until recently that the legislature approved in-state tuition for undocumented students; however, it still does not provide access to financial support, a factor that might at least ameliorate their struggles. In general, Hispanic students are likely to dismiss college options due to their perceived lack of financial support (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). For undocumented students, this is a reality rather than a perception when they do not have access to financial aid, which poses a considerable barrier to college attainment. The financial burden, for undocumented students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, makes their educational dreams nearly unreachable, particularly when an undocumented status may automatically mean the student is ineligible to any type of federal aid. Although there are some scholarships available to undocumented students, they are limited and hard to obtain. Furthermore, with many higher education institutions charging out-of-state tuition to undocumented students, scholarships can be insufficient. As such, this is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed because there is a growing population of Hispanic undocumented students who struggle to access college legally and financially (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011).

Another barrier to college access can be that Hispanics in general are less prepared for college courses (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). For example, they are less likely to have taken college preparation or advanced placement courses in high school that often offer an advantage in grade point average and college credit. In other words, Hispanics

have fewer opportunities to prepare for access to college and academic success.

Obtaining a college education is more important than ever before. Without a college education, an individual will likely be underprepared for 21st-century demands, which include obtaining post-secondary education degrees. Simply put, a high school education is no longer sufficient for today's workforce (Hirsch & Emerick, 2006). A college education significantly increases income in comparison with a high school diploma (Lopez & Lopez, 2010). Moreover, allowing undocumented young individuals to become educated and providing them a pathway to legalization will allow them to use their education to contribute to this country (Nienhusser, 2011).

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

The enrollment of Hispanic students in colleges has increased in the last two decades, mainly at two-year colleges. Although there is still a notable underrepresentation of Hispanics in higher education, community colleges have become an important vehicle to higher-degree attainment (Fry, 2002). However, national transfer rates from two-year colleges to four-year colleges/universities are only 10% for Hispanics (Nora, 2003). Hispanic students opting for a two-year college may be for several reasons such as vocational preparation, flexibility in schedule with many institutions offering night and weekend classes, more affordable tuition, and open admissions policies. Perez (2010) and Nienhusser (2011) concur undocumented students are more likely to access post-secondary education at a community college, with cost being one of the main factors as the majority of undocumented students do not qualify for federal or state financial aid.

While the number of Hispanic students who pursue a college degree is dismal, the issue is beyond college admission eligibility and financial burdens. Gildersleeve (2011) found that immigrant students face institutionalized inequality in college-going, and that college-going “is not an institutionalized practice, but rather emerges from exceptional practices by key interlocutors” (p. 74). Despite these barriers and inequalities, there are still some immigrant students who are enrolling in higher education every year (Gildersleeve, 2011, p. 75). Most of these students, however, find an invalidating and intimidating environment with a predominantly White faculty that has little to no understanding of the needs and strengths of minority students, a Euro-centered curriculum, and a fiercely competitive learning environment (Rendón, 1994; Nora, 2003). Similarly to Rendon (1994), Patel Stevens (2011) assents educators must have a more robust and rigorous way of knowing not just their students as learners, but as human beings in multiple contexts and understanding well those contexts. For instance, the context of documentation status, which highly impacts the lives of immigrant students. Patel Stevens (2013) argues undocumented youth are “de facto barred” from higher education, as they are unable to apply for financial aid. As such, there is a need for legislation such as the DREAM Act that can expand post-secondary education access for this student population (Nienhusser, 2011).

Political Climate, and Policy Impacting Undocumented Students

On June 15th, 2012, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano announced that effective immediately, certain young people who were brought to the United States at a young age would be protected from deportation or entering a deportation process. On

August 3, 2012, the Department of Homeland and Security (DHS) published updated eligibility guidelines for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. According to the updated guidelines (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2012), undocumented immigrants ages 15 to 30 who arrived to the United States before age 16 may qualify for deferred action if: (a) they have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007; (b) they were physically present in the United States on June 15, 2012; (c) they are enrolled in school, have a high school diploma or a GED, or have been honorably discharged from the military or Coast Guard by the time of their application; and (d) they have not been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor offense, or three or more other misdemeanors, and do not present a threat to national security or public safety. Undocumented immigrants who meet these criteria may apply for a deferred action permit that shields them from deportation for two years, and may potentially qualify them for work authorization. At the expiration of the two-year period, program beneficiaries can apply for a two-year renewal, pending a review of their case. According to DHS, renewals will be issued in two-year increments (Passel & Lopez, 2012).

On November 20, 2014, President Obama announced an additional executive action that his administration will implement as of March 2015. This executive action is an extension to DACA that removes the age requirement of 31 or younger on June 15, 2012. The action includes the new Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA). DAPA will allow parents of United States citizens or lawful permanent residents to apply for work authorization and protection from deportation, if they have resided in the United

States since January 1, 2010. It is estimated that over 4 million people will qualify for DAPA. In addition, spouses and children of lawful permanent residents as well as adult children of United States citizens, applying for permanent residency through a consulate outside of the country, may be able to get advanced approval before leaving the United States.

While creating a pathway to residency for undocumented students could increase the odds of their college success, there is currently no law that provides a pathway to residency for these students. As of now, nationally, DACA is a hope, and at the state level, adopted policies for in-state tuition are creating promising pathways for undocumented students in about 12 states.

In 2001, Texas was the first state to adopt the “Dream Act” policy, House Bill 1403 (HB 1403), allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition and making them eligible to receive financial aid (Flores & Horn, 2010). According to the bill, undocumented students must have: a) graduated from a Texas private or public high school or an equivalent to a high school diploma; b) lived in Texas for at least three years as of the date of high school graduation; c) enrolled in college after Fall 2001; and d) provided an affidavit of an intent to apply for legal residency as soon as they were able to do so (Flores, 2010). Flores (2010) studied if the adoption of the HB 1403 had an impact on the college enrollment of undocumented Latino students. Results indicate that since the bill passed, a general enrollment trend has been increasing steadily with notable numbers such as an increase from 600 to 2,000 undocumented students enrolling in one particular four-year college institution. Although the numbers have fluctuated over the

years, it is unquestionable that there has been an increase of undocumented students in college enrollment attributable to the adoption of the bill.

In Colorado, on June 2012 the board of trustees of Metropolitan State University of Denver (Metro) voted 7-1 to pass a tuition break for undocumented students (Cotton, 2012). The approval was well received by individuals such as undocumented students who benefited greatly from the decision; for others, the decision was disappointing, as they believed Metro was likely going around the actions of the legislation. Nonetheless, as of Fall 2012, undocumented immigrant students began to benefit from reduced tuition, and although it was not as low as in-state tuition, it was definitely much lower than out-of-state rates (Cotton, 2012).

Senate Bill 33, The Colorado Asset, was signed into law April of 2013 after six previous failed attempts over a period of 10 years that did not make it out of the Colorado legislature (Cotton, 2013). The bill grants in-state college tuition to undocumented students who have attended a Colorado high school for three years, and graduated from a Colorado high school or obtained a general education diploma. Students must also declare their intent to pursue legal immigration status (Cotton, 2013).

Social Reform

Legislation has had an impact on the opportunities that undocumented students have in the United States; however, undocumented status is a form of oppression as undocumented individuals are denied basic social and political rights (Gonzales, 2008; Gonzales, 2009; Perez, 2009). Freire (1970, 1993) constructed his model of social reform in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed relationship, in which he suggests that any

individual that benefits in any sense from an oppressive situation is an oppressor. In order to overcome a situation of oppression, “people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 29). Students with an undocumented status are recognizing their ability to transform the world that mediates them (Freire, 1970, 1990), and they are standing up, uniting, organizing and taking action to move them from the “status of unwilling victims to active participants” (Gonzales, 2009).

Freire (1970, 1993) stated that humans have the ability to see their world, objectify it, and work to transform it. It is possible for the oppressed to unify and organize to recreate the world and have it be what they aspire it to be. The work is referred to by Freire as a “revolutionary process” that is educational in nature because it seeks to liberate.

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. (Freire, 1970, 1993, p.36)

The oppressed people must unite among themselves regardless of their exact status. Unity is essential for transformation to take place, and to achieve it is necessary to understand that the struggle for liberation is a common task. The undocumented population, particularly students, are uniting to fight for equality; they are fighting for access to higher education, in-state tuition, overall educational equity, and a true pathway to residency (Rincón, 2009; Gonzales, 2008; Corruncker, 2012; Gildersleeve, 2011).

Student Activism

Students have been engaged in social reform through student activism. Sherrod (2006) defined youth activism as “behavior to promote causes, to change the status quo” (p. 291). Youth activism is not a recent phenomenon; notable cases such as the student walkout led by Barbara Johns in 1950 protesting the struggles of young people of color, the multiple marches of college students in 1963 that challenged segregation, along with other notable social movements in the 1960s and 1970s—antiwar, feminist, rights of gay, freedom of speech—were all mainly led by youth activists (Hosang, 2006, p. 6). Similarly, the blending of activism and academics dates back decades; recently there is an increasing amount of scholarship and institutional involvement in immigration issues that are now surfacing in college courses (Elfman, 2014), including discussion topics such as immigration issues, the concept of student activism, and cultural sensitivity and awareness curricula for pre-service teachers (Torres as cited in Elfman, 2014).

Immigration debates over the DREAM Act, DACA, immigration reform, as well as legal and undocumented young individuals pursuing a post-secondary education topics are more and more a part of college and university courses. There is a palpable urgency to increase awareness and directly address immigration issues as opposed to mere exploration and surface level discussions that have occurred in the past. For instance, cases such as that of undocumented college graduates Veliz, Lara and Chehade, which in 2008, inspired a movement to delay their deportations and to generate support for the DREAM Act. The movement continued with students across 26 states organizing events such as workshops, panels, rallies, forums and petition drives at numerous secondary and

post-secondary institutions (Rincón, 2010). Other forms of activism include marches, press conferences, mock graduations, and sleep strikes led by student advocacy organizations within their campuses and communities as well as with more formal local, and state level immigrant rights organizations (Rincón, 2010, p. 13). Furthermore, social networks have been vital tools for DREAM activists (Corrunker, 2012).

The power of young people organizing and uniting for rights to citizenship and a cease to deportations and family separations brought about the announcement of DACA in 2012 (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014, p. 289). The social and political actions for the opportunity to legalize the status of the undocumented population has not only stopped deportations and granted extensions of deportation or deferred action, but has revealed the undocumented youth are quite a powerful group as a result of their leadership and activism actions (Corrunker, 2012).

Unzueta Carrasco and Seif (2014) assent that after the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010, undocumented youth activists of today have initiated their own movement, with their own tactics and strategies. Moreover, they are fighting for the rights of people that are not strategically identified for the benefit of politics and are often not supported by other immigration advocates, but this emerging activism does not conform to the unspoken “good citizen” rule that has dominated the history of the United States immigration policy. Parameters are put into place that discriminate against certain races, genders and classes in an effort to identify those worthy of citizenship (Rincón, 2008). For example, the exorbitant application fee for United States citizenship automatically excludes many of those from the lower class (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014, p. 283).

Today's youth activists are moving away from depending on legislative decisions based on the "deserving vs undeserving based on the narrow meaning of meritocracy over a broader discussion of rights" (Gonzales, 2009, p. 422). Thus, youth immigrants are advocating for an inclusive immigration reform that encompasses more "working class and poor immigrants of color" (Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014, p. 281), and one that does not portray their parents as the culprits and law-breakers, or other students who did not have the same circumstances and opportunities to excel academically, as undeserving (Gonzales, 2009).

Unzueta Carrasco and Seif (2014) further argue that "young undocumented immigrants are finding power in telling the stories of people in deportation proceedings and exposing the workings of the nation-state through [our] public anti-deportation campaigns" (p. 295). Publically telling their stories is one more strategy that has been effective in stopping deportations and inserting themselves in the political dialogue. Corruner (2012) asserts more and more student activists are recognizing the value of proclaiming their status, and that the act of sharing their stories provides opportunities to connect with other students who share similar experiences, challenges and aspirations. Meanwhile, Gonzales (2009) posits that although these stories may compel the public to examine current immigration laws, they are unfortunately insufficient to "move the debate past limited and limiting frames" (p. 421).

Rincón (2010) claims "the challenge facing immigrant students is to remain at the center of their own fight as the protagonists of the modern civil rights movement" (p. 17). She further claims history seems to indicate that "in order to succeed, immigrant students

must reject persistent efforts to frame the debate in economic terms and, instead, present their case as a matter of equality, stressing the principles of basic fairness and democratic rights” (p. 17). Rejecting the perception that the undocumented population is “economically dependent and potentially criminal,” affirming the demand for “universal access to education” and appealing to principles of equality and human dignity, and constitutional guarantees. These principles and democratic protections will ultimately prove to be the most persuasive criteria to ensure a comprehensive immigration reform (Rincón, 2010).

Summary

This chapter presented the framework employed to guide this study, delineating Rendón’s (1994) model of student validation towards a new model of learning and student development. The chapter reviewed literature pertinent to the United States’ Hispanic undocumented population to build a foundation for understanding the experiences of the undocumented college-persistent students in this study. The literature in this chapter examined some of the issues undocumented students face, such as racial profiling, fear of exposure, and stigmatization due to their legal status (Barragan, 2009). The literature review revealed limited or lack of financial aid as an enormous deterring factor to a post-secondary education, particularly in the states that require undocumented students to pay exorbitant out-of-state tuition rates. The chapter also presented literature that suggests invalidating and intimidating learning environments are a greater deterrent for college persistence for those students who are able to overcome admission and financial barriers, which as suggested by Rendón (1994), can be counterbalanced with

validating experiences. Literature regarding social reform and student activism were added to this chapter as these research areas emerged as significant to the study. The literature review suggests undocumented students are uniting to take action to change their current legal status and demand a true pathway to residency. Furthermore, they are oppressed individuals who are choosing to become active participants as opposed to unwilling victims (Gonzales, 2009) in their own social reform movement.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

Although there are approximately 65,000 undocumented Hispanic students graduating from high school every year, a large number of these students are not pursuing a college degree (American Immigration Council, 2010). However, there are some, such as the participants in this study, who have been successful in accessing and persisting through college (Noguera, 2006). The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Rendón's (1994) student validation theory provided the framework that guided the development of this study, and a lens to analyze the data.

As a method of inquiry into the lives and experiences of these persistent undocumented students, this study employed the qualitative approach of critical evocative portraiture (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, 2013) developed from the foundation of Lawrence-Lightfoot's and Davis's (1997) portraiture methodology. This chapter describes the methodology of the study and presents the rationale for choosing this qualitative design. The chapter also describes the study's selection of participants, data collection process, data analysis, role of portraiture, limitations, and ethical considerations.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do undocumented students' in-class experiences, such as curriculum, classroom, and faculty interactions, influence their college persistence?
2. How do undocumented students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, influence their college persistence?

Qualitative Research

The interest in selecting a qualitative research method is consistent with the ideas of Creswell (2007), who postulated:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

Since this research sought to study the experiences of participants, a qualitative research approach is the most appropriate methodology (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Portraiture is a methodology that falls into the category of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Congruent with the methodology, the intention of the study was to create detailed portraits of the participants that "illuminate a situation . . . so that it can be seen or appreciated" (Eisner as cited in Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 5); as such, critical evocative portraiture is the most adequate approach.

Study Design

Critical evocative portraiture, as developed by Lyman, Lazaridou, and Strachan (2012, 2013), was selected for this study. This innovative approach was mainly grounded

in the methodology of portraiture as conceptualized by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), who searched to create text that came as close as possible to “painting with words.” This methodology was born “as a way of reflecting its cross between art and science, its blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.6). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), portraiture is a marriage between art and science in which the portraitist attempts to “capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (p. 3).

Framed by traditions and values of phenomenological paradigm, portraiture shares many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. However, the key distinction is that ethnographers listen to a story while portraitists listen for a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005); portraiture “is a more active, engaged position in which one searches for the story, seeks it out, and is central in its creation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.13). As such, portraiture is a useful methodology for sharing the human experience.

In portraiture, the detailed stories are told in order to illuminate more general phenomena; a subtle nuance of voice or posture reveals a critical attitude. Words are chosen to create sensations that evoke visions for the reader (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Portraiture is a genre whose methods are shaped by empirical and aesthetic dimensions, whose descriptions are often penetrating and personal, whose goals include generous and thorough scrutiny. It is a sensitive kind of work that requires the perceptivity and skill of a practiced observer and the empathy and care of a clinician. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 369)

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) categorized the major aspect of portraiture research to include emergent themes, relationships, contexts, voice, and the aesthetic whole. These major characteristics are what highlight and complicate the variety of roles played by the portraitist during the different phases of the research process.

The methodological approach was used to both analyze and present the data by creating a critical evocative portrait of each participant. The portraits of the participants were constructed by integrating the five essential features of the portraiture process: “context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. xvii), and the four dimensions of conception, structure, form, and cohesion (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Consistent with the work of Lyman, Lazaridou, and Strachan (2012, 2013), this study sought to inform as well as inspire through the critical evocative portraits of the participants. Eisner (as cited in Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 5) described the purpose of criticism and the importance of critical frames when he wrote, “Criticism is an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events so that others . . . can see and understand what they did not see and understand before.” The consistent use of the participants’ own words adds authentic tone and color (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan 2012), aiming to evoke the reader. Ellis and Bochner (as cited in Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 6) stated, “Evocative stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response.”

Rationale

Critical evocative portraiture is rooted in the methodology of portraiture as developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997). Portraiture has the ability to document the “beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.9). In portraiture, portraying how people have the ability to work together to create moments of success and triumph is referred to as “a search for goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p.23). Based on the research questions, portraiture is well suited for capturing and sharing experiences, which opens a dialogue that can lead to social transformation.

The social justice aspect of critical evocative portraiture (Lyman, Strachan, & Lazaridou, 2012) is reflected in the stories, which described how these undocumented students approached and endured their difficulties. In critical evocative portraiture, the hope is that the shared experiences not only provide information but also evoke feelings of inspiration (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012). The coding of the themes from the narratives, the details presented in the portraits, and the direct quotations from the individual narratives were all choices influenced by the desire to achieve the inspirational purpose (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 5). Furthermore, the goal of this research approach is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, as well as to include sensory and emotional experiences (Ellis & Bochner as cited in Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 6).

Critical evocative portraiture is the most adequate approach because the study sought to produce a full picture of the participants. Portraiture is used when the

researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells about the subject as it does about the researcher, or portraitist (Chapman, 2007), and when the aim of the critical aspect is “to illuminate a situation or object so that it can be seen or appreciated” (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012, p. 6). Critical evocative portraiture honored the complexity and powerful experiences of undocumented students; as such, this research approach was uniquely suited to provide insight into the experiences and challenges of this group.

Participants and Sampling Methods

The following criteria were used to identify and select the participants in this study:

- undocumented status, currently or at the time they were pursuing a college degree;
- Hispanic born in a Spanish-speaking country in South America, Central America, or Mexico;
- graduate of a Colorado high school;
- four-year college graduate (within the last two years) or currently in the last year of completion;
- available for three, one-hour interviews, as well as for the review and validation of the individual portrait; and
- willing to be audio-recorded, and to sign an informed consent form.

The main reason for only selecting participants of Hispanic background was to reflect the population that is most affected by legal status in Colorado. Furthermore, only

about 15% of the undocumented Hispanic population between the ages of 25 and 64 has earned a college degree, which is less than half of the legal population (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Moreover, this population was of interest to the researcher as she is a Hispanic herself.

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy as the main means to identify participants who were information-rich cases for in-depth study of the research problem (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The initial step in the recruitment process was an invitation in the form of a flyer (Appendix A), that was distributed through the researcher's main social network as her network includes many former students and acquaintances that are members of the undocumented population, and this was a network that has great potential to reach many prospective participants. As such, an effective method to recruit participants was the use of the flyer which included basic participant information and a brief description of the study. Potential candidates who responded to the invitation were immediately sent a letter of information for potential participants (Appendix B), which included detailed information (e.g., participant criteria, study purpose, and time commitment) about the study, as well as a full explanation of participants' rights in accordance with school and IRB requirements.

The study also utilized the snowball technique (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), which served to identify cases of interest from people who knew other people who added significant input to the research (Creswell, 2007). The snowball method was employed in order to reach the desired number of participants for the study. Two of the five participants were identified and selected through this technique.

Methods of Data Collection

The participant recruitment process began May 2014; four of the five participants were selected between May 2014 to August 2014, and the interviews were conducted intermittently over the course of these four months. The fifth and last participant was identified and immediately interviewed December 2014. Each individual participant was a critical case permitting maximum application of information to other cases (Creswell, 2007) that attempted to thoroughly illustrate the in- and out-of class experiences of undocumented students.

Although some of the data collected included field notes (taken during and after each interview session), the main instrument used to collect data was the interviews with the participants. The researcher developed an interview protocol that was guided by Rendón's (1994) student validation theory. Subsequently, using the principles of portraiture, the researcher conducted three one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded. The interview protocol (Appendix D) included a series of open-ended, broad questions that encouraged participants to tell their stories and allowed the researcher to explore the in- and out-of class experiences that validated them as students influencing their college persistence. This process allowed the researcher "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

The respondents participated in three one-on-one interviews of approximately one hour. The interviews were held two to seven days apart for most participants. The first interview questions gathered information regarding participants' personal and educational

backgrounds. The two subsequent interviews delved into the participants' college access and persistence experiences at their respective post-secondary institutions. The third interview also included questions regarding their future plans and aspirations and their hopes in regards to legal status. At the end of the third interview, all participants had the opportunity to add any additional information they wished to share or include in their portrait. The interviews were conducted mainly in English; Spanish was freely used depending on the language that made each participant feel more comfortable.

Interviewing was the most appropriate mode of data collection because the researcher's goal was to hear the experiences and listen for the stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of the participants. Patton (as cited in Merriam, 2009), explains:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point and time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer: We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 88)

Participants shared their inner feelings of past and present experiences, and perceptions that cannot be observed, but can only be told by the participants themselves.

Data Analysis

The raw data were pre-coded, coded and recoded over the course of six months with the purpose of identifying the overarching themes across participants. Following the recommendations of Saldana (2009), the data analysis began with manual coding on hard-copy printouts to attain "more control over and ownership of the work" (Saldana,

2009, p. 22), and “touching the data” permitted to turn abstract information into concrete data (Graue & Walsh, 1998 as cited in Saldana, 2009). Also consistent with Saldana (2009), the set codes were then transferred onto an electronic file for further analysis. The software, NVivo 10, was utilized to efficiently organize, manage, and reconfigure the data.

Saldana (2009) suggests the qualitative analytic process is a cyclical process that involves “comparing data to data, data to code, code to category, category to category, category back to data, etc.” (p. 45). According to Saldana (2009), there are two levels of coding, *First Cycle* and a *Second Cycle*. In this study, the complex data coding process included precoding, first cycle coding and second cycle coding.

According to Saldana (2009), precoding entails “circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strike you” (p. 16). In this data analysis, precoding occurred during the interviews, transcription and creation of the portraits noting significant or powerful participant quotes, repetitive ideas, and resonant metaphors (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

First coding cycle. The first coding cycle method utilized *Initial Coding* and *In Vivo Coding*. Initial coding is an open-ended process to data analysis in which the “first-impressions,” key words or phrases, are captured (Saldana, 2009). Saldana (2009) describes in vivo coding as a word or short phrase directly extracted from the qualitative data record. Quoting Strauss (1997), Saldana (2009) specifically defines in vivo coding as “the terms used by [participants] themselves” (p.74). Most importantly, in vivo codes “help us preserve participants’ meaning of their views and actions in the coding itself”

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 55 as cited in Saldana, 2009). Sometimes this in vivo coding process warranted *emotion codes*, these are codes that label the emotions recalled or experienced by the participants providing deep insight into their “perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Saldana, 2009, p. 86).

Second cycle coding. Once the researcher obtained a set of categories from the first cycle coding phase, employing a combination of manual coding and NVivo software, the data were coded and recoded through a second cycle coding process to reorganize and reanalyze the existing codes. Saldana (2009) explains the purpose of second cycle coding:

The primary goal during Second Cycle coding, if needed, is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes.... Basically, your First Cycle codes, (and their associated coded data) are reorganized and reconfigured to eventually develop a smaller and more select list of broader categories, themes, and/or concepts. (p. 149)

The researcher employed *Focused Coding* as the method for the second cycle coding.

Referencing Charmaz (2006), Saldana (2009) describes Focused Coding as a method that “searches for the most frequent or significant Initial Codes to develop ‘the most salient categories’ in the data corpus and ‘requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense’” (Saldana, 2009, p. 155). The coding and recoding of codes led to 47 categories. These categories were reorganized into a smaller number of redefined categories, then into emerging primary themes until there were five overarching themes through all participants’ data.

Member Validation

Once the portraits were completed, each participant had an opportunity to validate the content, context, and accuracy of their portrait. Member validation, also referred to as *member check* and *respondent validation*, is a process that is utilized by researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of a study (Creswell, 1994; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Sharpe, 2006). The researcher contacted some of the participants on different occasions to ask clarifying questions or request further information as needed. These type of member checks occurred from the transcription of interviews to the finalization of the portraits.

Confidentiality and Other Ethical Concerns

During the first one-hour interview with each participant, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, and presented the letter of consent before asking the first round of interview questions. Due to the sensitive nature of the students' legal status, the researcher placed greater emphasis on the verbal explanation of the consent form, particularly in the understanding of the great risk of being uncovered as undocumented individuals. Also, it was fundamental to first build a relationship of trust, and to assure students maximum possible confidentiality. In the same manner, it was important students understood their participation in the study also posed some minimal risks such as the possibility of some discomfort—for instance, emotional discomfort as they remember experiences that may potentially cause emotional distress.

Since participants were assured maximum possible confidentiality, they each chose a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. The participants' names were not

used in the audio-recorded interviews, only their pseudonyms. Audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher and stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's house. The recordings will be saved for three years after the conclusion of the study. At this time, the audio recordings will be deleted and destroyed. The reported data includes potentially identifiable information; however, only the researcher had access to the participants' identities.

The most important benefit for the participants, and for other undocumented students, is that the general population, particularly educational leaders, will gain insight into their experiences and needs through their individual and collective stories. It is hoped these insights will assist institutions to better serve this population. It is also the hope of the researcher that this study will validate the participants as undocumented students who, despite the difficulties they endured, successfully obtained their bachelor's degrees.

Role of Portraitist

In portraiture, a portraitist is "keenly aware of his or her many roles in creating narratives that move the readers to ponder their understandings of the world" (Chapman, 2007, p. 158). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), "the portraitist's voice, then, is everywhere—overarching and under-girding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes" (p. 95). "The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). Also, in portraiture, the person of the researcher—even when vigorously controlled—is more evident than in any other research form. The researcher not only defines the research and

the field of the inquiry, but also takes a role in navigating the relationship with his or her subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing the emergent themes, and in creating the narrative. The portraitist consciously explores the strength of the research site and the ways in which challenges are approached and handled, but it does not exclude the messy, contradictory nature of human experiences and behaviors (Chapman, 2007).

The following quote summarizes the understanding of the researcher relative to her role in this study:

The researcher brings her own history—familial, cultural, ideological, and educational—to the inquiry. Her perspective, her questions, and her insights are inevitably shaped by these profound developmental and autobiographical experiences. She must use the knowledge and wisdom drawn from these life experiences as resources from understanding, and as sources of connection and identification with the actors in the setting, but she must not let her autobiography obscure or overwhelm the inquiry. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.95)

Portraits

“Portraits are designed to capture richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p.3). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) posits that portraits are not static documents or exclusive texts that are directed towards a small circle of academic colleagues. They directly touch the actors in the portrait and may speak more broadly to a diverse range of people concerned about the issues and ideas expressed in the piece. Furthermore, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997, 2005) asserts that the personal dimension of the portraits and aesthetic qualities create symbols

and images that people can connect with, offer figures with which readers can identify, and ground complex ideas in the everyday realities.

The data that resulted from the participant interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim and used to write the narratives of the portraits. The portraits were individually written using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) four specific dimensions as briefly described in Table 1.

Table 1. Portraiture Dimensions.

Conception	The overarching story or vision that gives "the narrative focus and meaning" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 248).
Structure	The mechanical details of the narrative such as themes and metaphors, which give the story "a frame, a stability, and an organization" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252).
Form	The artistic texture, which illuminates the participant's experiences. Form is expressed through "examples, illustrations, illusions, ironies" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 254).
Cohesion	The formation of the narrative portrait occurs when the participant's story has coherence. This final aspect of the "aesthetic whole" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 256) is recognized when "the narrative holds together because there is a building of experiences, emotions, and behaviors that allows the reader an increasing knowledge and understanding of the scene and a growing relationship to the actors" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 256).

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997 as cited in Feldmann, 2013)

The process of creating narrative portraits requires a difficult (sometimes paradoxical) vigilance to empirical description and aesthetic expression, and a careful

scrutiny and modulation of voice (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). There is never a single story; many could be told. As such, the portraitist is active in selecting the themes and deciding the points of focus and emphasis. What is left out is as important as what is included. The researcher, the portraitist, chose to use the words of the participants throughout the portraits. Using the participants' own words provides an authentic tone and color to each portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan 2012).

Statement of Researcher Perspective

The subjectivity and perspective of the researcher are factors in conducting this study.

Interplay, by its very nature, means that a researcher is actively reacting to and working with data. We believe that although a researcher can try to be as objective as possible, in a practical sense, this is not entirely possible. Thus, it is preferable to self-consciously bring disciplinary and research experience into the analysis but to do so in ways that enhance the creative aspects of analysis rather than drive analysis. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 59)

As an individual who has undocumented family members and an educator who works with undocumented students, it was important for the researcher to recognize her personal experiences and attitudes about the research topic. One of the limitations of this study is the perspective and subjectivity of the researcher in conducting the interviews and analyzing the data. In order to better understand this bias, it is necessary to briefly explain the researcher's background: The researcher is a Mexican-American born in the United States, yet raised in Mexico until the age of 16. When her family moved to Colorado, three of her siblings were undocumented. Also, as an educator, having lived

the experiences of many undocumented students so closely, the researcher has strong feelings in regards to this topic.

In this study, the researcher's background experiences were an asset:

Experience and knowledge are what sensitizes the researcher to significant problems and issues in the data and allows him or her to see alternative explanations and to recognize properties and dimensions of emergent concepts. However, we are not saying that experience is used as data. Rather, we are saying that it can be drawn on for the purpose of sensitizing the researcher to the properties and dimensions in data, always with considerable self-awareness of what the researcher is doing. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 59)

To control for bias, the study methodology protocols were carefully constructed and followed. Participants collaborated in the story-writing phase of the research process. As mentioned previously, participants also had the opportunity to read their own stories to ensure the researcher had captured the essence of their experiences as they had lived them. Each participant received a copy of their portraits to review for accuracy and give validation to the content and context (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Summary

This chapter explained the qualitative study design that was utilized as well as the rationale for selecting critical evocative portraiture as the methodology. The chapter provided information regarding participant selection, data collection, and the methods employed to analyze the data and identify the overarching themes. These themes will be presented and discussed in the second section of the next chapter after the participant portraits are presented.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Rendón's (1994) student validation theory provided the framework for this study. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do undocumented students' in-class experiences, such as curriculum, classroom, and faculty interactions, influence their college persistence?
2. How do undocumented students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, influence their college persistence?

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section presents the individual participant portraits constructed in accordance to the methodology of critical evocative portraiture (Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012). The portrait construction also followed Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) four dimensions of portraiture: *conception, structure, form* and *cohesion*:

- Conception: The conception of the portraits was based on the participants lived experiences as they persisted through the college journey. The researcher "pulled"

from the voices of the individual and collective experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to give focus and meaning to each of the portraits.

- Structure: The presentation of each portrait follows a similar structure in order to organize and present the information leading to the emergent themes in a clear manner giving the stories “a frame, a stability, and an organization” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252). Likewise, the structure adds artistic texture in order to illuminate the participant’s experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
- Form: Form was expressed in the portraits deliberately using the participant’s own words throughout.
- Cohesion: The portraits are organized in a logical and aesthetic way presenting the stories in a cohesive manner. They build on the participant’s experiences, emotions, and behaviors, which allow the reader “an increasing knowledge and understanding of the scene and a growing relationship to the actors” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 256).

As stated in the last chapter, “portraits are designed to capture richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p.3). Portraits directly touch the actors in the portrait and may speak more broadly to a diverse range of people concerned about the issues and ideas expressed in the piece. Furthermore, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997, 2005) asserts that the personal dimension of the portraits and aesthetic qualities create symbols and images

that people can connect with, offer figures with which readers can identify, and ground complex ideas in the everyday realities. Used in this manner, social science portraiture may play a critical role in shaping educational practice and inspiring organizational change (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 378).

The second section of the chapter presents the five overarching themes that emerged from the analysis of the raw data and the portraits. The themes are explained in detail, and the participants' own words are used to support each of the themes.

Before introducing the participants, their backgrounds and portraits, a brief overview of the researcher's background is presented:

The researcher came to the United States as a high school student, and at that time she faced many of the challenges most immigrants encounter. She faced acculturation, linguistic, racial, and stereotyping issues. The greatest challenge was not speaking the language. On the other hand, a significant advantage was that she was not undocumented; despite the way she looked, the language she spoke, and her "newcomer" status, she was a United States citizen. As such, documentation was not an obstacle to achieve her educational and career goals. Although the researcher did not experience first hand the difficulty of being undocumented, she did live it very closely as three of her siblings were undocumented when the family moved to Colorado. She knows her siblings felt there was no motivation to complete high school if immediately after obtaining their high school diploma their educational aspirations would most likely die due to college barriers inherent to an undocumented status such as lack of financial resources for college. Furthermore, as an educator, the researcher has seen the negative effects of an

undocumented status in young high school students; how they can get discouraged from performing well in school and/or pursuing a college education.

Table 2. Participants Background Information

Name	Age of Immigration	Method of Entry	Reason for Immigration	College Major (s)	Graduation Date	Future Plans
Emiliano	12	Crossed across Mexico-US bridge	Economic opportunity Reunite with mother working in US	Marketing	May 2014	Remain in US
Sofía	9	Tourist visa	Economic opportunity Reunite with father working in US	Social Work	May 2015 (expected)	Remain in US Saudi Arabia*
Raúl	10	Borrowed documentation	Parents' Divorce Reunite with mother working in US	Social Work	May 2015 (expected)	Remain in US Spain*
Susana	7	Crossed across Mexico-US bridge	Domestic Violence Reunite with mother working in US	Media Arts & Spanish	May 2014	Remain in US Mexico*
Melinda	6	Borrowed documentation	Employment Opportunity Reunite with dad working in US	Human Resources: concentration in mental health counseling	Dec. 2016 (expected)	Remain in US

Note. *If participants can obtain legal status, the country listed is where they desire to seek employment.

Section One: Portraits

Emiliano

Shortly after posting the participant recruitment flyer, Emiliano eagerly responded that he was interested in being a participant. While I already knew Emiliano, many years had passed since I had last seen him. I was extremely pleased to know he would be one of my participants since I knew about all the obstacles he faced to obtain his bachelor's degree.

I immediately emailed him the documents needed for the study and shortly after, we scheduled the first interview. All interviews took place in the living room of my apartment. The first two interviews were a week apart and the third one was a few weeks later. Emiliano seemed to enjoy our interviews, even after a long day at work. He was always in a good mood and joked around throughout his storytelling. His candid, yet amusing personality made each interview highly interesting and entertaining.

A life of scarcities. Emiliano was born in a very small town in a state located in the northern center of Mexico. He lived there the first twelve years of his life. One of five children, Emiliano remembers growing up in severe poverty that was full of scarcities. His father abandoned the family when Emiliano was only four years old, which left his mom with the enormous responsibility of raising five young children on her own:

The lifestyle that we had when we were little was kind of tough. So ever since I was four, I just remember some days not even having food, and she [mom] would say that she was going to ask one of her bosses to see if he would give her an advance, like a check advance. Some of the bosses weren't willing to do that. She used to work at this pizza place. And then she used to work at a meat place. Then she worked at a grocery store. She was a maid for some wealthy people in our town. And she was also doing laundry for people that she knew. She was cooking. At some point she was selling food at night from our *saguán* (front patio of the house). She would sell food there. She would make those potato tacos, *tacos dorados de papa*, so she would make those and she would just sell them. I mean, she was doing so much to be able to support me and my brothers and sisters.

At the young age of twelve years old, Emiliano's oldest sister had to work as hard as their mom to help provide for her younger siblings:

My oldest sister, I remember, she used to work so much that I don't even think she had a childhood, really, because ever since I remember she was always working at the grocery store; she was doing work for people; she was making clothes; she was helping with whatever she could to make money. . . . My brother

[only two years older than Emiliano] was in charge of us, so kids taking care of each other.

Despite all of the kids trying to pitch in and support the family, they were unable to make ends meet.

Early on, Emiliano's dad was almost an entirely absent figure in the children's lives. He had another family, so he only visited them on the weekends before he completely walked out of their lives:

His [dad's] wife could only have one kid, so "he had to" find someone else to have more kids so he had five with my mom. He, I guess, wasn't happy with us; I mean he was never really with us. He used to come on the weekends and then he used to go back home the rest of the week. . . . *Eramos como los "bastards."*

Eramos como los bastardos. . . . [My dad] was very selfish. I think that's what pushed my mom to come to the US, which [the journey] was pretty dramatic. She was really struggling, and when she went to my dad and said, "I need some money because we don't have food. The kids need clothes and shoes. We can't pay for gas. We really need you to help us out." He said, "Never. When you decided to push me away, you all died to me. So don't ever look for me; don't ever ask me for anything—you guys are all dead to me." And that's when my mom said she was leaving.

In 1994, Emiliano's mom could no longer withstand the harsh life in Mexico, so she decided to attempt to immigrate to the United States with the hope of a better life. She

brought only one of her daughters with her and left the rest of the children behind in the care of Emiliano's oldest sister:

So just seeing my mom struggle so much to support me and the rest of my siblings kind of always made me want to do better, and when she decided to leave us in Mexico with my 18-year-old sister, I know that was breaking her heart because of course she was leaving her kids with an 18-year-old. I know she wasn't very sure of what was going to happen with us then, but just being by herself for so many years . . .

After his mom left Emiliano and his siblings to come to the United States, not only was she physically absent in their lives, but they had not heard from her for three months. Sick with worry about their mom and sister's fate, they managed to contact their mom's sister, who lived in Denver at the time. Unfortunately, their aunt had not heard from them either. It turns out, Emiliano's mom had tried to cross the border unsuccessfully many times; she was stranded in the border town of Ciudad Juarez without any money, and unable to communicate with her children back home. As Emiliano would learn later, the *coyotes* (people smugglers) had taken his mom and sister across the border several times. However, they were either caught or his mom had purposely ran into border patrol agents so they could give her and her daughter water to survive, after they had walked to the point of extreme exhaustion:

That's the reason why it took her so long, because these smugglers, *coyotes*, they really didn't care. They would push people to the point where they can't even walk. . . . They don't have any water. . . . They can't even breathe. It's just so hard

when your mouth is full of dust; you can't breathe, you can't run, you can't walk, your body physically can't even do it anymore because you are so sore from hours of all these movements that you're not even used to doing. But my mom knew she had to stay safe, and that's why it took her so long to cross.

Finally, Emiliano's mom and sister successfully crossed over to the United States when a woman paid the fee for a *coyote* to cross them one last time. According to Emiliano, this woman practically kept his mom and sister as slaves for about a year to repay the money she had given the *coyote*. They had to clean her house, cook for her family, and take care of her children without any pay. After about a year, one Friday night, the woman simply told them they were finished paying off their debt and they had to leave the house immediately. Thanks to the help of several people they had developed friendships with in the last year, they were able to borrow the money they needed to continue their journey to their final destination, Denver, where they would join Emiliano's aunt.

Once in Denver, his mom found work at a fast-food restaurant for three or four dollars an hour. Her meager earnings were barely enough to survive, let alone allow for the opportunity to provide financial support to Emiliano and his siblings in Mexico. Emiliano remembers not only continuing to struggle with the ravages of poverty, but enduring hurtful comments from people in their small town:

Little kids were telling us at school, they were saying, "You guys don't have a dad and now basically you don't have a mom—she's not coming back." They all knew; it was a little town. People would say they had seen stories in the past

where mom or dad leave to look for a better life for their kids, but in the processes they kind of forget the purpose of why they left. They forget the reason why they left, and they never come back. They marry someone in the US, and they leave their kids abandoned in Mexico. So that was always going through my mind: “My mom is not really sending much money, she’s not keeping in touch—she’s not coming back. Maybe she already got married. Maybe she already left us.”

Emiliano’s mom continued to promise that she would return to Mexico for her children. However, after four difficult years had passed, Emiliano’s oldest sister decided she had had enough of taking on the responsibility of a mother. She felt it was time to take the kids “back to their mom.”

When Emiliano’s oldest sister collected her *aguinaldo*, Christmas bonus from work, she undertook the trip to the United States to reunite the kids with their mom. Without a visa or any other kind of legal documentation, the kids opted for simply walking across the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso Bridge. Emiliano was caught the first time, but his second attempt was fruitful. He was twelve years old when he came to the United States.

Unfortunately, to Emiliano’s disbelief, life in the United States was not much different from Mexico. Emiliano had to work to help support the family. Just like his siblings, he obtained forged documents that not only stated he could lawfully work in the United States but that he was also of legal working age. Emiliano recalls everyone in the family working themselves to exhaustion to just barely survive. Most of them worked at a

fast-food restaurant where they made very little money for long, grueling hours.

Furthermore, they were being mistreated:

I was probably about 13, but my documents said that I was 15 or 16, so I started working as a cashier at [fast food place], and my brother was already working and my oldest sister was working. Everybody was working so much! My mom was working a lot. She was being mistreated so much. I actually got fired from this job because they weren't very nice to us. I feel when you have a family to feed and you feel that you don't have a lot of options, you kind of have to take that kind of treatment and make the best out of it when you can. I was just a kid and I was being mistreated, and I said, "I'm not going to take this from you guys; I don't really need this check," even though my mom probably thought, "You do need that check." No (chuckling), she was very supportive.

Emiliano's mom supported his actions because she realized that after all, Emiliano was just a kid. Emiliano's brother was also enraged about the treatment everyone was receiving at the restaurant and he decided to walk out with Emiliano. They both quit that same moment.

A student with potential and vision. Emiliano continued to work long hours to help support the family. He also attended school full time. Luckily for him, as he puts it, he was able to advance a grade because the school district placed him according to his age, which was 7th grade. In Mexico, he was a year behind in school because he had failed 2nd grade. Emiliano truly enjoyed the two years he spent in middle school, and he described the experience as fairly positive.

Comparing the school systems and teachers from Mexico to teachers here, Emiliano describes his expectations and reality:

I feel that in Mexico teachers are more aggressive (chuckles). It's nice that the teachers [in the US] respect you as a student, and they won't crush your bubble; I felt that that was a really good thing. Being in Mexico and experiencing that your bubble gets crushed a lot I remember teachers pulling my hair, pinching me when I wasn't answering something exactly how they wanted it. They would come and pull my ear and tell me I'm not very smart. So just experiencing that as a kid, coming to the US, I expected the same. I thought teachers were going to be aggressive and they were going to break that personal space that one has, and they didn't. I actually hoped that somebody did. There are some kids in these schools that really need to get their bubble crushed, destroyed (laughing), because they really need it.

According to Emiliano's experiences, students in the United States sometimes demonstrated little respect for teachers. Emiliano found himself assimilating with the disrespectful behaviors he observed tolerated by teachers. He jokes about some of the behaviors he exhibited in middle school would have granted a slap if he were in Mexico.

Despite how "tough" or "aggressive" the teachers in Mexico can be, however, in terms of academics, Emiliano believes that these teachers are far more caring, and the small-town environment fosters much closer relationships among the teachers, students and their families—relationships that translate into a special, mutual commitment to the academic success of the student:

Academically wise, I think teachers in Mexico are way more. . . . But again I'm from a small town and these are very small classrooms. . . . So when I was in 2nd grade, I failed, so I had the same teacher for 3rd grade, and she had me come after class to her house and we would write and read, and we would do math. Do you think that a teacher would ever be allowed to do that here? No! Do you think a teacher would ever be willing to do that here? I think it's more personal. I believe teachers in Mexico care more about the students because—especially when you're from a small community—they know your parents; they know your siblings. They were probably your siblings' teachers when they were little. You live in the same neighborhood. So they help you after school to do work you didn't get done in class. They put in all this extra time to allow you to succeed.

Furthermore, Emiliano believes the educational system in Mexico made a stronger effort to involve parents in their children's education than the schools in Denver, and this makes "a huge difference for their kids." The relationship between teachers and families in Mexico is closer, and parents are far more informed than they are in the United States. Emiliano feels the difference may be that once parents are in the United States, they tend to be more preoccupied with the demands of their work.

Emiliano's transition to high school was quite smooth because he enrolled in the neighborhood high school that many of his friends also attended. A year into his high school experience, Emiliano began to feel the urge to go back to Mexico and confront his father. This was only three years after he had come to the United States. "I wanted to see him because I had so many things to tell him, not very nice things. I guess because I had

seen how much we had struggled, and how unhappy we were in the United States, and how unhappy my mom was. . . .” Although Emiliano had not had any contact with his father after he abandoned the family, Emiliano always felt the need to speak with him for closure. Knowing he would struggle to return to the United States, he also crafted a plan that would allow him to cross back (at Emiliano’s request, this is all the information that will be shared as to how he crossed back to the US). Emiliano knew exactly where to find his dad, and when he saw him, he did not hesitate to confront him and let him know his thoughts: “Dad, it was your fault and you should know that. You had this beautiful family that you could’ve enjoyed, and you chose not to, and now we’re in the United States struggling and you’re here in Mexico.” Emiliano’s dad was still with his “main” family, and they were not very happy Emiliano had confronted him.

Emiliano returned to the United States after a few weeks and was able to resume his studies in high school promptly. During his sophomore year, Emiliano began to feel his school was not doing enough to encourage him to do more—to do better academically. As he recalls, during his high school years, had somebody talked to him and all the other students who were floundering (a vast majority of whom were Hispanic) more directly and said, “You guys are going to college and that is your only option. We’re sending you to college, you are doing well, and we will prepare you and continue to push you,” perhaps this would have provided a more promising academic outlook for Emiliano and his peers. Also, Emiliano feels he wasn’t very motivated in high school. From Emiliano’s perspective, his high school teachers focused their efforts on those students they considered to be the “smart ones,” and it seemed that they left behind those

who were not “very bright.” He feels he didn’t have someone to encourage him to do better or tell him he had the potential to do better. He feels he chose not to focus on his studies because he believed he was not very smart:

I know I’m a hard worker. I know I’m very ethical, I am very respectful, I care for people, and I have all these good things about me, but I wasn’t very bright. I knew that when I was in high school. I knew I had to work hard.

Nevertheless, Emiliano had what some of his “smart” friends didn’t have—he had a vision of his future. He had a deep desire to do better:

You have to fight if you really want to do better because if you don’t want to do better in your life, there’s nothing. . . . You kind of settle for whatever comes your way, but I feel that when you have a vision of your future, you can fulfill all these dreams. But dreams without a vision mean nothing.

As a first step to prepare for his future, Emiliano began taking classes at a local community college while still in high school. “Which I failed, by the way,” he shared, chuckling.

A benefactor. After Emiliano was fired from the fast-food restaurant, he obtained a job at a local wildlife park. He was in charge of the ice cream machine at one of the food stands. Years passed, and he was still working at the park as well as any other temporary or one-time jobs as he could find. One day, the CEO of the wildlife park approached him and said to him, “I see you working all the time here at the park, and I see you working special events all the time. You guys [Emiliano and his youngest sister] are everywhere; at the gardens, at the park, at the Western Complex doing events, outside

catering, but you guys are so young. Why are you guys working so much”? Emiliano explained that after his older siblings left the home, he, along with his mom and youngest sister were solely responsible for paying all of the bills, including a house mortgage. He asked Emiliano if he was attending college. Emiliano responded that he had tried but that it was cost prohibitive. The CEO said, “How about I pay for your college? I want to pay for your college. . . . You say you can’t go to college because you either go to college or pay your bills. Then I’m going to pay your college, and you pay your bills.” This individual was not only willing to offer financial support (in-state tuition rates) for Emiliano’s education, he also told him he had faith in him, and he knew he could do it.

Finally, Emiliano was equipped with the moral and financial support he needed to enroll in college two years after he graduated from high school, in 2005. He successfully obtained an associate’s degree from a local community college, and then enrolled at a four-year college. When Emiliano enrolled in the local community college, things had changed drastically for undocumented students since he attended in high school. Students without a Social Security number were now required to pay out-of-state tuition. Taking a few community college classes during his high school years greatly benefited Emiliano because he had previously been assigned a nine-digit student identification number, and in a way, this number functioned as a Social Security number. This number automatically placed him in their system as a Colorado resident. This allowed Emiliano to complete his associate’s degree paying in-state tuition rates. So even at this point in his life, Emiliano had not realized the implications of an undocumented status:

Even when I was in college, I wasn't very aware of my status because I was working, my mom was working, all of us. Somehow my mom was able to purchase a home, so we were living a "regular life." We were driving even though we were not supposed to drive. I wasn't doing anything that required me to have a social. I even went to Mexico in 2001 (laughs), so I thought, "I can get by. It's okay. It's not going to [restrain] me from where I want to be."

From the time Emiliano was a young child, he aspired to do something that allowed him to talk and work with people, and help better their situations. As such, the nonprofit world was attractive to him since this was where he felt he could make the most difference. "I want to work at a place where I can make a difference. I have so much to offer to the community and to so many businesses and organizations. . . ." With this in mind, Emiliano enrolled in a local public university and majored in the field of marketing. After two semesters, he transferred to a local respectable, private university, with competitive tuition rates for undocumented students, and a system that better served his needs working full time while attending college. Juggling a demanding work-school schedule, he was unable to take more than a couple of classes at a time. Although his college journey was a long one; Emiliano persevered over the years and he successfully obtained a bachelor's degree in marketing!

College experiences. While Emiliano made brief references and comparisons to the first two post-secondary institutions he attended, with regards to pedagogy and environment, his recollection of his college experiences focused mainly on the university from which he graduated. Emiliano holds this institution in high regard because his

experiences proved that it is a place that promotes academic success and empowers students to excel.

A nurturing environment. Emiliano's busy work and school schedule did not allow him to interact often with professors or peers outside of the classroom: "I would go really early in the morning, go to class, do my work, leave. Next time I was on campus, do the same: go to class, do my work, and leave." Nonetheless, Emiliano describes his university's learning environment as friendly and supportive. The class interactions were positive since most classes were structured in a manner that engaged students in group conversations, field projects, and class presentations. This approach fostered consistent professor-student and student-student interactions that supported Emiliano's learning style.

Emiliano perceived the professors as extremely supportive with providing students the tools needed to succeed. For instance, they offered office time for one-on-one help, assisted students in navigating college outside of the classroom, and developed hands-on projects that prepared students for jobs in the "real world." When Emiliano needed academic assistance, he was always able to meet with professors. The Marketing Department at the university demonstrated a high focus on providing a culture of consistent, constructive feedback to students. Emiliano spoke extensively about the effectiveness of the professors' feedback on his projects as well as the reflections he was asked to write based on that feedback. The professors' knowledge and real-world experiences greatly contributed to Emiliano's academic success. Most of Emiliano's professors possessed job experience in the industry:

For instance, our advertising and promotions professor used to work for Mac. She was their product development [manager], so she has worked for big companies. One of our strategic management professors used to work for a company that creates widgets for NASA. I mean, these are very smart people who have actually experienced what it's like to do these kinds of jobs. They bring a lot to the classroom when they share their knowledge. So if you come up with an idea, they don't necessarily crush your idea, but they tell you what you can do better; they tell you what you can do better to not fail rather than tell you that it's not a good idea. I think that makes a huge difference because the professors are people who have actually done "it." It's not like people who teach marketing but they've never actually worked in the field. These professors teach marketing, and they actually did or still do marketing as a living.

The professors' field experience helps them create a different approach to learning. Hence, they taught students the skill to identify weaknesses as opportunities for improvement and growth, and [marketing] threats as opportunities to react quickly. Emiliano was consistently motivated by his professors who saw his potential. They encouraged him to think "really high" of himself, and this, in turn, raised his self-esteem.

Although there was not a lot of diversity at Emiliano's school, he was well liked and respected by his professors. They perceived the diverse perspective he represented as an asset to the classroom and to class projects. According to Emiliano, it was his professors who contributed the most to his growth:

I don't think I am the person that I was when I went to [previous university]; I just feel [current university] definitely made me a better and wiser person. I think they knew there wasn't a lot of diversity in that school, so therefore they saw me as somebody who could bring something into a project. They knew that I came to the United States when I was pretty young, so they knew I am bicultural: "So, you are not that naive about the American culture and obviously you came from Mexico and you are surrounded by a lot of Hispanics; therefore, you also know that culture first hand. You have the advantage that you know the American culture and you know the Hispanic culture."

The Hispanic perspective he contributed was clearly valued and viewed in high regard. In fact, he often wished he were not the sole voice in the room for providing the Hispanic point of view to marketing projects. Emiliano flourished in this environment and did not miss the negative experiences from previous institutions that viewed his cultural and language background as an impediment to his academic success.

Classmates, not friends. Emiliano's interactions with peers outside of class were extremely limited. Emiliano attributes this to his busy school and work schedule as well as "not fitting in" culturally. Although he worked well with his peers within the classroom structure, he struggled to build relationships outside of class time. In fact, the number of friends he made at his school was virtually zero, which he emphasized with chuckles of disbelief since he is such an extroverted, social, and friendly individual. In one of his last classes before graduation, he had worked closely with another student who was Hispanic, not first generation in the United States, but Hispanic nonetheless.

Emiliano thought perhaps this relationship could continue beyond college, so he invited her to his graduation party. She did not attend, and he has never heard from her since. Emiliano also worked with a classmate who proved to be a great resource in learning the Excel program when working together on school projects outside of class time. This “friendship” did not prosper either:

I became friends with this guy, really smart; most of my Excel skills I got from him because we were on a team, so we were doing a lot of outside work together. I was just soaking in as much Excel knowledge as I could. He’s a finance analyst, so of course he’s doing all these Excel spreadsheets—he was very talented. So I thought, “I am going to learn everything I can for free from you (chuckles).” That’s the way to do it. You surround yourself with smart people and people who have those skills, and eventually you’re just hanging out, and they’re teaching you, and you’re learning [One day] I sent him an email asking him to meet up and go have a beer. Do you think that he ever messaged me back (chuckles)? He was probably like, “Nah, we finished our finance class. We’re done. We’re never hanging out.” He never actually said that, but again, he never replied.

Interestingly, this was a high contrast to Emiliano’s previous experience at the community college where he made many friends with whom he is still in contact. He became friends with people from Peru, Colombia, and even continues communicating with a friend who moved back to Japan. The primary difference being that the community college was more diverse with students and professors from all over the world.

Student services. As Emiliano recalls his interactions with student services at his schools, he recalls utilizing the writing and math center when he needed help in his community college years. The labs were staffed by students who were really helpful and patient. At his second institution he was essentially on his own for the two semesters he was there. At his college alma mater, there were a lot of opportunities for students to get help:

At the beginning of each class, they [professors] hand you a sheet that has all these seminars on how to become a better writer, how to use APA and MLA, seminars on accounting. So they have all these projects on the weekends. During the week, throughout the whole week, they used to have a program where you would meet with your own writing consultant, and you had about 30 hours a semester that the school paid for.

When the program that sponsored the writing consultants ended, students were able to seek out help from other students in the writing lab. Unfortunately, this was not as convenient as the former program because students had to work around tutors' schedules. Emiliano utilized the tutors for final papers right before graduating, and he regrets not taking advantage of these supports earlier because the tutors worked with him one-on-one and truly provided useful feedback on his writing, "the tutors were amazing writers and really helpful." On another occasion when Emiliano procrastinated on a writing assignment, he had no choice but to ask the librarian for help. To his surprise, the librarian did not hesitate to help him:

I wrote a paper once that was due around 7:00 p.m., and it was 5 o'clock, and I was killing it and I told one of the people at the library, I said, "You're probably not a consultant, but I have a paper and I am going to make an assumption that you're a good writer; would you please read my paper"? So he read it, and he fixed a few problems, and I submitted it, and "we" aced it (chuckles). But he could have just said no.

Needless to say, Emiliano was grateful that this individual went out of his way to support a student in urgent need. According to Emiliano, this would have never happened at the other institutions.

An experience with a staff member from the financial services office was quite the antipode of all the positive interactions with other faculty and staff at the university. The quarter before his graduation, Emiliano registered for his last two courses, but was unable to pay the additional costs of out-of-state tuition at that moment; something that had occurred on multiple occasions. A couple of days before the payment deadline, Emiliano called the financial office to let them know he would need a two-week extension. Emiliano describes the lady he spoke with as rude and tactless. She made statements that he should consider himself lucky that he is allowed to enroll for classes without paying in full immediately as other "international" students do:

This last time was kind of traumatizing because she was telling me, "You are lucky we even allow you to sign up; no other university allows undocumented or even international students to sign up without money. I already told you that if you do not have the money, we will drop you. Go find one of your relatives or

friends to borrow the money, or I will drop you tomorrow.” She was just very negative. I took it very personal, and I felt like she was going against our ethnic group. I didn’t feel like she was just talking to any international student; I felt she was going after the Hispanic and the undocumented community—as if she was going after the “lower-class” community. I just felt everything was so personal without her realizing that if I did not have a good self-esteem, if I didn’t have mentors who had my back, and if I didn’t have good relationships with all my professors, I could have dropped out. She has no idea that the things she was saying could have really affected me.

Two days after this conversation, Emiliano was dropped from his classes. Emiliano feared that, unlike previous times, he would not be able to simply log in and re-register for the classes when he had the money. He was in the final stretch before graduation. “They did drop me. And that’s when I went crazy. You don’t know me; you don’t know Hispanics. You don’t know a crazy Hispanic. I thought to myself, ‘oh no, she didn’t.’” He vehemently added, “We [Hispanics] have really been pushed away, have been stepped on so much, so many times, that I felt she was going to hear it.”

Although Emiliano could have resorted to family and mentors, he initially refrained because he wanted to be independent and “get out of it” on his own. After he was dropped, fearing the classes he needed to graduate would be closed, he succumbed to asking his family for financial help. Emiliano was hurt and felt betrayed by the university. He trusted the university to honor its mission, which is, “...To be there for one

another.” Even though he can now retell the story adding a sense of humor, it is evident he will never forget this disheartening experience:

I did not expect that because everything I’d said about that school was always good. I always recommend [the university]. The professors are amazing. They’re talented. They’re smart. And when this happened, it was almost as if all of the good was thrown down the drain. All I had in my mind was the conversation I had with this woman. So I think that as an undocumented student I did not feel appreciated. I felt they didn’t want me there if I did not have money. They didn’t care who I was, where I came from, what I brought into each of the classrooms or to the group studies. They just cared about the money, and since I didn’t have it, they were kind of letting me go. That’s pretty much how I felt. I was just a business transaction (chuckles).

Emiliano sought out one of his professors that he considered a mentor, to help him address this frustrating experience directly with the university. The professor wrote a letter to university officials and shared Emiliano’s experience. At the end, Emiliano was able to complete all of his courses successfully and graduated at the end of the quarter as planned.

The meaning of life. Emiliano values his education and college experiences tremendously; he particularly values what he learned in a philosophy course titled “The Meaning of Life.” It taught him to further appreciate his non-material possessions:

I didn’t used to appreciate the things I have as much. I used to be, or think that, I was materialistic, but I’m too poor and broke to be materialistic (laughs at the

irony). Even then I wanted nice things, and you know at some point I thought about buying a pair of jeans that were \$225, and I wasn't making much money. So who in their right mind thinks that? I just wanted this image. I had been consumed by the marketing world, and I thought I needed those jeans because they were going to make me look fresh, and so much better, and all this.

The course also taught him to value himself as a person and embrace his differences—his uniqueness: “. . . Embrac[e] that you're different and there's no one, absolutely no one like you in this planet.” Respect and negotiation were also highly emphasized attributes of this course:

It has to do with respecting people, respecting their opinion, respecting their differences and to “negotiate” for what you want in life. In life you do not get what you deserve, but that for which you negotiate. For instance, perhaps you deserve a raise at work, but if you do not negotiate for it, ask for it, you may not get it, even when you deserve it.

The fundamentals of this course also translated to Emiliano's other classes. As a result of this learning, he found that his reflections in general evolved to a higher level and were “not superficial—another journal entry—they were meaningful.”

Failing is not an option. College graduation is inarguably Emiliano's most remarkable accomplishment to date, and while his success can be attributed to his tenacity and desire to prove to others he could accomplish such a feat, there were other contributing factors. Emiliano has a few people, two former teachers and the CEO of the company for which he works, that he considers his mentors and the most influential

people to his academic persistence and success. His mentors had faith in him and supported him with words of encouragement throughout; advice; guidance; and in several instances, financial assistance. “To some extent, they took on my mom’s responsibility as far as asking questions such as, ‘How is school? How are you doing? Do you need any help? Are you failing any classes?’” Emiliano felt compelled to succeed because he did not want to “let down” his mentors: “My only option is to do well because not only are they putting their money into my education, but they really have faith in me, so failing is not an option for me.” Emiliano’s mentors treated him as if he were part of their family, and they were consistently involved in his education.

Emiliano’s family played a minimal role in his persistence since he is the first and only one in the family to have obtained a college degree:

My family, since they haven’t been exposed to education as much as I wish they were, I don’t think they understand how important it is. So if I didn’t do my homework, they didn’t care, or if I were to miss school for any reason, they didn’t care. If I was doing well, if I was doing badly, oh well. So I don’t think they were too concerned, or even aware, of how well I was doing.

Emiliano recalls the times his mom didn’t even believe he was at school doing homework when he’d come home late:

When I was staying really late doing homework, she [Mom] would say, “I think you’re partying with your friends.” And I would say, “No, I’m not partying with my friends; I’m doing homework, really! You can come with me and sit at the lab. We have 24/7 labs so no excuse to not use the computers, 24/7—you can do

homework all the time. . . .” I wish that she would ask, “Why aren’t you doing homework” or “How are you doing in school”? I graduated with honors, but she didn’t even know what that meant. I had a 4.0 when I was in college—she didn’t know I was doing so well.

For the most part, it was his oldest sister who understood more about college, for she had completed a year or two of post-secondary work. However, she lived in Mexico and was extremely busy taking care of her own family. Despite his family’s limited involvement in his education, Emiliano was motivated to excel for them. He greatly appreciated the sacrifices his mom had made to come to the United States and how hard she worked to support her five children on her own.

El sol [no siempre] sale para todos. While being the first and only one in his family to obtain a college degree should be a positive experience for the entire family, this was not the case for Emiliano. To some extent, his education actually affected his relationships with family members and friends negatively. Emiliano attributes this to his family and friends’ lack of exposure to a formal education. He believes that different perspectives often evoke conflict with those who do not have a formal education. One recollection he had to support this was a conversation (which the more he described, the more it could be perceived as a heated argument) with a friend from high school.

Emiliano was trying to share some information he had learned in school that could be beneficial to his friend. His friend was adamantly closed off to Emiliano’s point of view. Emiliano reflected:

I've been having a lot of conflict, these kinds of conflicts, with my brother-in-law, with my mom, my aunt, and my cousins. And I came to the conclusion last night that it's because I have been exposed to a formal education, to research, to new information. . . . They're so close-minded about certain things, and they think you're just acting like you're smart. They think you're just saying this because you want to make them feel less smart, but really, that wasn't the point that I was trying to make—I was not trying to make myself sound smart.

Emiliano considers himself extremely fortunate to have a formal education that exposed him to what he describes as a new and more open approach in thinking. Although he wishes he could share the knowledge and skills that he has acquired through college with his friends and family, sometimes he feels he should refrain in order to avoid “further conflict,” as he put it, chuckling sarcastically.

Another clear example of conflict was when Emiliano tried to give marketing advice to family members about a business they wished to open or they already owned. One family member, who wants to open his own business, had a conversation with Emiliano trying to subtly solicit his marketing knowledge. When Emiliano asked him a series of questions to understand his business plan, the conversation created some friction between the two of them, and other family members became involved:

So I asked him, “Why do you want to start this business? What is the mission of your business? Why do you think you should create this venture”?

“Because I think that I can make money.”

“Well, do you have a plan? Do you have money or funding? Where are you getting the money from? Let’s create a SWOT [a marketing plan].”

He tells me that I’m just being negative. It’s not that I am being negative, but let’s face the fact that 75% of new businesses fail within the first three years. Why do you think that happens? Because they’re not planning. They are not funded. They throw themselves into a venture without learning the business, and that’s why they fail. It’s not that I want to crush their dream to be business owners—again they argue with me. . . . I’m giving them free advice (laughs sarcastically).

Emiliano jokes about “keeping his knowledge to himself” and sticking to simple conversations with his family to avoid conflict so they do not think he is trying to come across as a know-it-all:

And when I argue with my family, they have this phrase, *El sol siempre sale para todos* (the sun always comes out for everybody). And to that I say, “No, it doesn’t (joking chuckle).” There is 75% of people their sun didn’t come out for them, and that’s why their businesses failed, so *el sol no siempre sale para todos*. [They say] *Hay negocios para todos* (there is a business for everyone); no there isn’t (laughs amusingly)!

Emiliano knows he can still have fun conversations with his family, and now it has become a joke among the family that every time a topic arises, they turn to Emiliano for his opinion and advice as he is the “knowledgeable” one, the one who went to school. Emiliano realizes there is a difference when he has conversations with people who are

“formally educated”; they tend to be more open minded and like to engage in intellectual debates. Nonetheless, he relishes the times he can natter with his loving family.

Blocked. Even though Emiliano wants to open his own business one day, his plans for the near future are completely contingent upon his legal status. Emiliano has applied for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and he is hopeful he will get approved. He meets all the criteria, and he has submitted all the required documentation. As soon as he receives his work permit, he would like to join the marketing team at the wildlife park. He wants to demonstrate to people at his work that he has the capacity, the skills, and now the degree to do more than twist ice cream cones. Emiliano has worked at this establishment for over a decade; thus, it has become a personal ambition to demonstrate to those who believed in him, and those who didn’t, that he did it—he obtained his bachelor’s degree:

I really want to show my boss, the GM, the CEO, and some other people who have not been as nice as I wish they were, that I can be better—that I have a lot of potential. . . . I want to do well so my bosses can see me dressed up really nice, with clean clothes, no hats, just making a difference for the wildlife park. I’m going to do well so they can see they have missed out on someone good, and they haven’t taken advantage. Since I’ve been there for so long, I’ve been just having that in the back of my mind. I want to join the marketing team at the wildlife park, and I will.

During his time at the park, Emiliano has been temporarily promoted then demoted, moved from one area to the next, and people have often questioned his

capacity, but this has only motivated Emiliano to work harder. Emiliano is driven by what one of his professors once told him: “If people don’t have faith in you, if there’s someone specific that has always doubted you can do it, show them wrong. Do well. Be successful. Kind of slap them in the face with it.” Emiliano is confident that as a result of the relationships he has built at the park, particularly with the CEO of his company, he will be given the opportunity. “Right now, *como dicen en español, todavía tengo el dedo en el renglón*, (like they say in Spanish, I still have my finger on the row), and I am going to join the marketing team at the park”!—he stated with conviction.

As Emiliano awaits for his DACA and, with that, for the opportunity to join the wildlife park’s marketing team, he utilizes his marketing skills to expand his sister’s business. He also does photography on the side, but as he says, without a Social Security number his options are limited. If he does not get his DACA, he is considering going back to Mexico:

I told my mom if I get deferred [DACA], I’m going to get an awesome job, of course, because I need to earn some money, but if I don’t, I’m going back to Mexico. . . . You have one life, and you have to make the best of it, and if they’re going to block me in the US, if my legal status is going to be getting in the way, I’m not going to stay in the United States.

Emiliano’s greatest hope is to obtain legal status, not just DACA, but authentic legal status that will allow him to buy a house, perhaps have a business of his own, and have access to lines of credit in order to really make his business successful. He considers himself innovative and creative; as such, he wants to open a business that is creative and

artistic. Although he is not certain what his business will be, he does know that he does not want to continue to work wherever they will hire him regardless of his legal status: “I want to be able to choose where I want to work”!

Emiliano is also considering working for a non-profit organization where he will have ample opportunities to help others. He repeatedly expressed his desire to do something “more meaningful” in life. “Right now I feel what I am doing is not meaningful.”

Sofía

Sofía was the first participant I interviewed. We completed all three interviews within a period of one week. Sofía was highly eager to be part of this study and to tell her story. When we set the first interview, I asked Sofía to select a location of her preference for the interviews; I offered suggestions such as her home, a coffee shop, a park, or the living room of my apartment, as I had known members of Sofía's family for several years. Because the ability to converse freely and openly was important to her, she quickly selected my living room. Sofía arrived promptly to my apartment complex, and when I opened my door, she was there with a bright smile, eager to begin the conversation. After reviewing the consent form, Sofía signed it and asked no additional questions. We promptly began the first set of questions. At the end of our interview, I thanked Sofía for her time, and she thanked me for "doing this." I asked what her favorite soft drink was, so I would make sure I had it for the next interview.

Our second interview was scheduled just a day later. We met at the same location with the same protocol, but this time Sofía's soft drink of choice was ready for her as she walked in. I was excited to interview Sofía again; I opened the door and there she was with her bubbly and passionate personality that was reflected in her words, expressions, and body gestures. We quickly proceeded to the interview, and just like the day before, she answered every question with great fervor, smiling the entire time. The second round of interviews was quite intense as we were beginning to delve into her college experiences. For Sofía, this particular time in her life allowed for her revolutionary spirit

to flourish. At the end of the interview, Sofía sincerely thanked me for choosing this topic for my dissertation.

The third and last interview was slightly shorter than the other two as it only included closing questions and future plans and aspirations. Sofía also had an opportunity to add any further comments or valuable information that I might have failed to request. As a good college student, Sofía offered a thoughtful conclusion as if she were concluding an essay for one of her college classes. As we walked to the door, I told her I would keep in touch with her about reviewing and validating her portrait. She again gave me a heart-felt compliment for advocating for undocumented students through this study, and as it is custom amongst Hispanic women, we kissed each other on the cheek as we said goodbye.

Visiting dad. Sofía was born in a border town of Mexico, which we will call “Frontier” in this study. She lived here for the first nine years of her life before coming to the United States. Sofía’s family consists of both of her parents and two siblings. Sofía’s father was the first one of the family to immigrate to Denver in search of a better job, after obtaining a temporary tourist permit. On Sofía’s ninth birthday, the rest of the family made the journey to Denver to visit Dad. Little did Sofía know that what she thought was just a family vacation would turn out to be a radical change in her life: “I thought that we were just going to come and visit, but then we actually ended up staying, so my parents had to enroll us in school and everything. It was pretty out of nowhere.” With a fairly easily obtained six-month permit to enter the United States, Mom and the three kids came to Denver with just enough luggage for a few days.

Sofía shared the details with regards to how her family decided to stay in the United States,

. . . My dad had come to the United States a year before. He had been living in the United States already for a year, so he had been working here for a long time. My mom in Mexico was working at a *maquiladora* (factory), so I’m pretty sure it was very hard for my mom to be doing it on her own, even though my dad was helping her, sending her money and everything. You know, a lot of families do that. But then also things at Frontier were getting all violent; there was even problems in our neighborhood. My mom even got into a fight one time. I don’t know—it just started getting very, very aggressive in our neighborhood; plus, you know, we didn’t have our dad. So like I said, we were just planning on visiting my

dad, but then we ended up staying. I guess my mom just decided, like, “Oh no, it sucks to be without your dad,” and we all didn't like it.

Sofía remembers her experience arriving to Denver as “crazy,” and something “completely different” than any other experience in her life:

We ended up getting off in downtown Denver, so as soon as I saw all of the buildings, oh my God I was in love. The streets were so clean, there were squirrels on the street, I was like, “What is this [laughs]”? I had only been to the zoo in Mexico one time, and that's where I saw most of the animals, you know; Frontier is a desert, so you really don't see that stuff. But yeah, everything was so green, the buildings were humongous, there were parks, something that in Frontier I don't really remember going to. Plus we were really happy because we saw my dad.

Sofía also expressed that her mom and the rest of the family felt safe being in Denver, reunited with dad. She added, with the big, charismatic smile that appears often, when Dad picked them up from the bus station, he was driving a “crappy” car that, at the time, she and her siblings found to be super *chido* (cool).

English—the giant barrier. Sofía entered the United States system with only background experience from her elementary school in Mexico, and soon she realized there were more differences than similarities. For instance, in Mexico she had to wear a school uniform daily, teachers were, as she described, “way stricter,” and the school buildings were smaller with less space and fewer amenities. In the United States schools, she could wear practically any clothes of her choice, which in her case was not

convenient as she brought only a few outfits for the “short trip.” Sofía describes teachers in the United States as more lenient with students, less strict; as such, students were able to get away with a lot. In fact she recalls a student hitting a teacher and giving him a black eye. Despite this, she felt the teachers in the United States were “pretty awesome” for the most part. The school buildings were also quite different in the United States. The schools that she and her siblings attended were enclosed and the hallways did not have windows, which at times, made it feel like she were in jail. The most prominent differences that she remembers were amenities that were available such as playgrounds, playing fields, and gymnasiums, which her school in Mexico did not have. With regards to academics, in the 4th grade she was learning material, particularly in math, she was taught in Mexico at least a year before. In fact, her teacher thought she was very advanced in math, and referred to her as, “really smart.”

The most difficult part of Sofía’s initial schooling experience in the United States was the language. She felt forced to speak English “just to go to school”:

And at first, they [neighbors and acquaintances] had told my mom, “Just enroll them into English as a Second Language (ESL),” and my mom said yes, but then other people told my mom to just enroll us into regular English classes, so we [Sofía and one of her siblings] can learn fast, and that's what my mom did (laughs). I think my brother and I were just enrolled into English right away, so it was pretty hard, but our teachers were in a Hispanic community, so they were very understanding of our circumstance, so they were pretty easy with us.

The demeanor of Sofía's teachers made the transition to her new "life" a bit less daunting.

Many of Sofía's classmates were from Mexico as well; however, she felt that while her peers looked similar to her and spoke Spanish, they always addressed her in English, the language she did not understand. Sofía remembers, appreciatively, when her teachers saw her struggling with the language, she provided her with different resources (e.g., books on tape). Her teachers' efforts to help with English made it bearable for what she recalls as a "horrible beginning" to her schooling in her new country. Around the transition from 5th grade to middle school, Sofía felt she had acquired enough skills to fluently participate in basic conversational English—she communicated with ease at school, with friends, and especially with her younger sibling, who had picked up English really easily and was even beginning to forget some Spanish. At home, all children were required to speak only in Spanish because their mom did not want them to lose their native language, nor "talk about her behind her back."

Sofía recalls a bitter experience when she was in 8th grade and she encountered teachers who prohibited students to use Spanish to communicate peer-to-peer, claiming that this practice was offensive and hazardous since teachers did not know if students were planning something against one of the teachers. Sofía regarded their reasons for prohibiting Spanish as absurd. Sofía's bubbly personality shined through as she shared details about this situation. "But in middle school we were all Mexican, all of us, like, we can't help it"! She said, breaking into laughter.

For the most part, Sofia's high school experience was not much different for her since she continued to attend the same 6-12 school:

My middle school and high school are actually the same school, so there was actually not that much of a big difference because the teachers already knew me. I had pretty much the same teachers. My friends were also the same, so . . . my high school years were lovely, until I hit my junior and senior year because I had to work my hardest, especially trying to get my 4.0 so I could get good scholarships, or better scholarships, that I could apply to.

As mentioned previously, Sofía was only nine years old when she entered the United States school system in 4th grade. Although she was old enough to be aware of her immigrant status, it didn't really hit her until she had to start planning for college. Sofía's mom always "pushed" Sofía and her siblings to seek a higher education. Going to college right after high school was their only option. As such, Sofía started taking the initial steps that year. This is when, in her own words, "my entire life changed."

Sofía recalls one day she found her older sister crying because she was struggling to pay for her college classes: "That's when it hit me . . . because I was like, 'you're actually crying because you have no money to pay for college.'" Sofía quickly realized, "I don't have the same opportunities as other people." Determined, Sofía found a way to create opportunities for herself. She knew financial aid was not an option, so she became highly involved in school organizations and community service to expand her access to as many scholarships available as possible:

I joined this organization [pro and for immigrant organization] out of my high school, plus I also started getting educated about my own issue, and then I realized that I wasn't the only one [undocumented student]. There were many of us, especially at my high school. I did not realize it until we were applying for FAFSA, applying for scholarships, and for college. From my organization, I started to meet with other organizations that work on immigrant issues, so I'd be more aware of what resources I did and didn't get.

Sofía, like many other students, was eagerly applying for all scholarships available to her. Using humor to convey her seemingly futile efforts, Sofía joked that she applied for over 30 scholarships, of which she only received one! Interestingly, she recalls that she didn't even qualify for the one scholarship she was awarded, but was able to obtain it thanks to the help of a Colorado Senator she had met through one of the organizations in which she was involved. Sofía said that the senator "put in a good word for her," as he typically did for students, to either receive scholarships or admission to certain colleges.

The nine missing numbers. Sofía always loved school, and she certainly always planned to attend college; therefore, she sought out college experiences while she was still in high school. Her high school offered middle college classes outside of the high school campus; thus, during her last year, Sofía enrolled in a few classes at the local community college. She continued planning for college, but her plans were significantly different from what reality turned out to be. Sofía wanted to attend a university in her home state and obtain a degree in forensics. As it turns out, she is attending a college out of state, which is more affordable than the in-state schools and is currently majoring in

social work. Sofía's parents struggled with her decision to leave home since, in most traditional Hispanic cultures, children do not usually leave their home until they get married. Sofía, however, knew she had to go to college and due to her legal restrictions and financial limitations, this out-of-state university was really her only feasible option.

Sofía learned about this college option through her high school advisor—an advisor who, himself, “had to get educated on undocumented and immigrant issues” to help the large population of undocumented students that attended her high school. Sofía recalls that at first, the advisor was always trying to get students to apply for FAFSA, to which she thought, “Dude, we already told you we don’t qualify for that stuff.” After learning about the needs of his students, this advisor contacted Sofía’s current university and brought a recruiter to her high school to give a presentation. The reduced cost was very attractive to Sofía and many of her undocumented peers. She was immediately convinced this university was her best option because money was one of the biggest barriers to going to school:

I made my decision [to go to college] when I got accepted to the University of [university’s state], which was probably in February of 2010. I was going to graduate that May. For sure, I got accepted in [university’s state], so I thought to myself, “I can definitely afford that, so I know I’m going no matter what.” My parents were still having issues about me getting out of the house without being married. But I knew I was going to go to college the minute I got accepted.

There were several significant players in Sofía’s decision to access and attend college. “I personally felt that they [her teachers] all were 100% pushing me and helping

me pursue college.” Her high school advisor was essential in accessing college, particularly for exposing her to information about her current university. Her mom played a key role because her expectation was for all of her children to attend college, even if it could only be one class at a time due to financial limitations. Sofía’s oldest sibling, who was still in college when Sofía started her first year, served as a role model for Sofía; this sibling has now graduated with a Bachelor’s degree. It took years for her to graduate; sometimes she could take only one or two classes per semester due to a lack of financial resources. Sofía was hoping this would not be her case and that she would complete college in just four short years.

As Sofía described the challenges that come along with her undocumented status, she explained that although financing college has been quite an obstacle, the biggest obstacle by far, from her high school years until now, has been fear:

Fear in everything really. I started driving my senior year—just a little bit through my neighborhood and to school, which is not a lot—but even just driving evoked this strong sense of fear. I knew I was undocumented, and I did not have my driver’s license. I was barely learning how to drive. And the fear of getting deported—I think that’s the biggest fear. Now, not anymore because of my DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) permit, but I just got my work permit like a month ago. So it’s been a lot of years [of fear], and that’s been the biggest obstacle for me, and I think that’s the biggest obstacle for a lot of people that surround me that are undocumented: the fear of getting deported. Also the fear that you’re not going to get a job because the social security number you put

in is fake. The fear that maybe you're not going to go to school the next semester because you don't have the money for it. The fear of just getting discriminated even within the same community that you live in, or the people Let's say if you go to administration [college administration offices] when you know a lot of the people there are not educated about undocumented students. The fear that, I don't know, that you have to struggle more and work a lot harder than other people. That sucks! It's unfair. I can qualify for so many things like other friends can qualify for, but the only thing that is missing is those nine numbers. I don't qualify for many things because of those nine numbers. Yet, I have been living here more than half of my life. That's unfair!

Before her arrival to her new school, Sofía had envisioned what college would be like for her. She imagined a lot of freedom, fun, meeting many people, accompanied with high academic demands. She realized she was going to have to work extremely hard, and that failing was not an option. "It would be so stupid of me that paying for my own school I fail a class because I slack off." Most of these expectations turned out to be her reality, with the exception of the academic demands during her freshman year. She expected to have an abundance of material to read, numerous lengthy papers to write, and strict deadlines to meet. In actuality, the load of work turned to be manageable, at least the first year, and the professors were incredibly supportive and "lenient." What Sofía did not expect was to get homesick. "I thought, 'I'm going to be outside living on my own; my parents will not be there to tell me, 'You have to be here before midnight,' but I got homesick a lot.'" Also, she did not anticipate the difficulty of living on her own—being

responsible for paying rent and bills. As she spoke about all these responsibilities, she also noted that her undocumented status posed an additional problem when trying to obtain utility services in the home she shared with another student. Since Sofía's scholarship covered only her first year of school, she has had to work in order to remain in school and pay her bills. Sofía continues to enjoy the freedom she longed for, but she's learned she has to balance school, work and her social life.

College life. The class sizes at Sofía's school are pretty small, even compared to the average college class size. Some of her largest classes were during her freshman year, when she took the core classes all students are required to take. Yet, the largest core class she has taken had only 47 students. Sofía knew that going to such a small university would mean small classes, and she liked that. She came from a small high school where her graduating class was about 75 students with a 100% graduation rate. As such, she was accustomed to small classrooms, and she appreciated the personalized attention and family-like environment. With regards to the curriculum, the university integrates various cultural aspects in all of its subjects. Regarding this, Sofía commented:

I am Mexican. And I've always known that I am Mexican. I'm not very patriotic at all either, but I became very involved into culture or cultural issues in this state because most of their curriculum is about culture. I think I became more familiar with my own culture and [learned] how to appreciate it, and how the issues of culture are affected because someone else comes in and interrupts that environment. I don't know—it has been very eye opening.

Sofía enjoys and values that the university is part of a culture-rich community and state, and this is weaved into everything the university does.

Family away from home. Sofía shared fond stories about her relationships and interactions with the faculty at her school. Sofía feels she has positive, open relationships with all of her professors as they are always willing to help in and out of class time. In addition, the small community allows for professors and students to consistently interact with each other in the common spaces (i.e., the language learning center). Furthermore, there are many social exchanges that occur beyond the school campus as this is a small town where everyone sees everyone at the local grocery store.

Sofía has built positive relationships with her professors as well as with some faculty she sees regularly around campus despite the fact that she has never been enrolled in their classes. Sofía's two closest relationships with professors, ironically, have never been her assigned instructors. One she knows quite well because he is the leader of an organization to which she belongs, and the other is a professor who is well known to everyone for helping students with homework, giving advice, and even buying groceries for students in need: "She was just kind of an advisor to a lot of the students there. Like I said, she wasn't even my professor. She would ask us [Sofía and her friends] if we needed anything, like food or anything like that. One time she gave food cans and stuff like that to me and my roommate at the time."

Both professors have been highly involved in Sofía's life both in and out of school. They have provided support with academics as well as with personal needs, building family-like relationships that will likely last beyond the college years. These two

professors go out of their way to ensure students such as Sofía, have a place to spend Christmas if they cannot go back home. Many times, they have personally provided food for them or helped with rent and utility service bills. One of the professors used his own name and social security number so Sofía and her roommates could have access to electricity and gas services. Sofía treasures and holds on to these relationships when she is on the verge of giving up, particularly around midterms and finals.

Peers, acquaintances, and friends. Sofía's experiences with her peers are similar to those with professors in the sense that the small community environment and the small town are conducive to interaction. Sofía sometimes finds it difficult to "deal with" some of her classmates since many of them are athletes, and in her perception, exceedingly arrogant. At times, she feels professors and other staff focus primarily on these students, placing more attention and pressure on them to complete assignments and keep their grades up. Most athletes in Sofía's classes are males, which, according to Sofía, increases the passion of the discussions when it concerns gender or sexuality topics. Sofía recalls trying to "fit in" during her first year of college, so she tried to remain quiet even when she disagreed with other students' opinions. Fortunately, her professors promoted all perspectives to be shared when debating a controversial topic, eventually compelling Sofía to share her point of view. Typically, most non-athletic students would refrain from participating unless the professor actively encouraged them.

A social justice advocate. The most powerful college experience for Sofía has been her involvement in social justice organizations that she has been a part of since her freshman year. She is particularly passionate about those that focus on immigration

issues, not only because of her own background experiences, but because there are so many others that attend the university and live in the community who are also impacted. At her institution, immigration/documentation status is primarily an issue for the Hispanic population. However, there are some students from countries other than Mexico who, after completing their undergraduate degree, decided to stay in the States to work to either further their education or pay for their school debt, and have exceeded their time limit of legal status.

Sofía is highly involved in a club called MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/Chicanas de Aztlan—Student Movement of Chicano/Chicanas from Aztlan* [Aztlan means a promising land]). MEChA includes students from different parts of the world; nonetheless, the majority are of Mexican descent. MEChA concentrates on different institution and social issues; however, its main focus is immigration issues. The club has been successful in changing some of the university's policies and systems for the benefit of the undocumented population. For instance, the university now only requires social security numbers on forms where it is imperative students disclose this information. The university has removed this requirement on many forms when it is not necessary information, in an effort to protect the undocumented status of its students. The club has also provided training to teachers and staff on the details of having an undocumented status so these students are still able to receive important information such as the in-state tuition policy. The club is actively involved with the community, supporting events such as the annual Las Fiestas (the parties) as well.

Sofía has taken a proactive role in obtaining information regarding immigration matters. “I’ve educated myself about these issues. I’ve helped myself, and I’m trying to help others as well, and that has given me a lot of power—knowledge in getting educated. Creating awareness that something has to be solved about undocumented students, and not just the students but immigrant issues overall.”

Student services. Sofía admits she is satisfied with her school’s services such as the language-learning center, and she does use other services such as the tutoring and writing centers. The language-learning center has become a valuable spot for Sofía because here she has the opportunity to meet many students, promote and recruit members for MEChA, and even find a job as a Spanish tutor, which will start this coming semester. According to Sofía, it is very common to find professors at the center interacting with students and offering academic help. Although Sofía’s university is quite successful in providing students with academic services such as the language-learning center, other offices at the university could benefit from learning better customer service approaches and more importantly, become more culturally aware of how to better meet the needs of immigrant and undocumented student populations. For instance, although Sofía qualified for in-state tuition as an undocumented student, she paid more than double in out-of-state tuition for two years because the office of the registrar, financial aid, and admissions neglected to inform her of the university’s policy that would allow her in-state status. Also, Sofía recounted an event when she was highly frustrated with the service she received from the office of the registrar when she attempted to get a copy of her transcripts. Sofía had not paid for her classes; as such, by policy, the office would not

issue her any documents. For Sofía, the frustrating part was not the policy, but the way she was treated for owing money. In her frustration, she responded to the office personnel, “I know I need to pay . . . You have no idea who you are talking to; I don’t qualify for any of your financial aid.” The lady persisted to ask Sofía when she was planning to pay. Sofía felt like she was being scolded: “*Me estaba regañando* (she was scolding me).” Unfortunately, due to financial hardships, Sofía pays late every semester.

I remember that time, that was the most annoying experience because they [registrar’s office personnel] don’t understand sometimes the things we have to go through. I always pay my school way, way late. Like right now, I still owe money for my spring semester, but I know I’m going to need to pay it in order for me to go to fall semester but, I don’t know . . . they wouldn’t understand.

Sofía understands her responsibilities as a student as well as the regulations schools must have in place so students comply with their financial obligations. What truly bothers her is that, based on her perception, people don’t even try to understand the hardships she endures in order to pay for school each semester. This lack of understanding leads to poor customer service to students who are not up to date with their financial obligations. “A lot of the ladies were just like very grumpy; it would even give me a headache to just think I have to go to the registrar’s to deal with this thing.”

While many of Sofía’s experiences with support service personnel have been rather unpleasant, she is deeply appreciative of the interactions and relationships she has developed with her professors and peers.

Extracurricular activities. Although Sofía does not participate in any university sports, she does enjoy, as time allows her, watching the university's teams play. She belonged to the rugby club; although it is not an official university sport, it provided an opportunity for her to interact with peers. The students must fundraise in order to keep this club, but Sofía didn't mind as she truly enjoyed her time in the club. Because of work, school responsibilities, and her leadership role in MEChA, Sofía is no longer a member of the rugby club.

Sofía's work with MEChA has extended beyond the campus and the local town; she is part of the [university's state] Dreamers in Action, an organization specifically fighting for legal status for undocumented students. Through her involvement in Dreamers in Action, she was able to join the national organization, United We Dream. Her work at all levels includes speaking to state officials regarding issues such as driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, organizing rallies and protests, providing "know your rights" workshops, stopping deportations, advocating for an immigration reform, informing government officials and the public regarding ballot initiatives, and requesting their support through their votes, etc. During her sophomore year, this work cost Sofía her exposure as an undocumented individual not only to the community but to her own employer:

When my boss told me he saw me on TV, I was like, "*No manches* (no way)! F*#%, I'm going to get deported"! I didn't know what was going to happen to me. And there were around seven of us working at [same location], and all seven of us were undocumented. Even after this incident, I continued to be very open

about being undocumented—coming out to people and telling them I am undocumented is what changed my mentality. . .

Sofía is aware that being an activist is a tough battle that requires massive, arduous work, a large time commitment, and increased risks of deportation.

Despite the potential legal consequences, Sofía's passion for social justice surpasses her fears. Even when her employer confronted her after seeing her on television, publicly disclosing her undocumented status, she still strongly believes her efforts will help change people's mentality. Sofía has experienced first hand the shock people express when they discover she is undocumented. She has received comments such as, "You are undocumented? Really? You don't look undocumented." She realizes some people have misconceptions about the undocumented community. "People don't see the face of a hard-working student and productive citizen when they think of an undocumented individual." Sofía is confident she can help educate the community around immigration matters; as such, she embraces the opportunity to try to change people's thinking by sharing her story. Also, telling her story has allowed her to know who she really is; she describes this experience as liberating: "[It] is like coming out of the closet as an undocumented student," she said giggling.

Sofía's passion to advocate for rights for the undocumented is highly evident. Mixed emotions of pride and humility invade her as she talks about her leadership role and accomplishments in this organization:

It helps me to feel better about myself. It helps me to feel unselfish. I'm trying to do something. I know it's for me—it helps me personally because I'm

undocumented, but it helps my family, and it helps people that I will never even meet. I don't know, it makes you feel good, like, "f*#% yeah, I've gotten something accomplished."

This sense of worth has compelled Sofía to persevere in college, so that she can continue her work for this cause as a profession.

Key factors in Sofía's college persistence. There were a few influential factors that Sofía attributes to her college success: family support, personal value in education, university professors and college peers. Sofía's parents, particularly her mother, have always actively encouraged her to pursue college. Now, they are always available to motivate her when she is overwhelmed with academic demands. Sofía swayed between laughter and teary eyes as she recalled some of the most challenging times. ". . . midterms, those are the hardest days of my life, yet my parents are like, '*O no, ya mero acabas miya; échale ganas ya mero acabas* (Oh no, you are almost finished, baby; keep it up, you are almost finished).'" Sofía has friends who have personally said to her that their parents do not care whether they go to college or not; hence, they do not. Therefore, she appreciates the support and motivation she receives from her family.

Sofía attributes some of her persistence in college to having to pay for it on her own; she believes this has augmented the value she places on an education. She is familiar with students who, despite getting FAFSA support or full-ride scholarships with the luxury to select the school of their choice, end up quitting school. Since her undocumented status does not allow her these financial assistance opportunities, every semester and every class is truly a financial investment she cannot forsake. "Paying for

my own school has definitely made me aware that I better not mess up because I am paying thousands and thousands of dollars; it would be stupid of me if I fail.” The other factor is her professors—“the professors that I’ve created relationships with in my university. They expect me to graduate.” These close individuals have supported Sofía financially, emotionally, and most importantly, academically. These are the people who see her every day to remind her she will graduate. Sofía shared that sometimes her involvement in the MEChA organization consumes the majority of her time, and these professors are the ones who help her refocus on her graduation path.

I know I’m doing so much work outside of school that I realize I better focus on my school as well as that is the only reason why I left my home to come to this state, not just to be organizing. I’m here to graduate, and my teachers expect that from me. I respect that, so I respect them. And of course I would like to see that [her graduating].

The support from her college peers has also been instrumental to Sofía. Although she is not a traditional college student, she does not feel like a minority, in a technical sense, because there are many other students who look like her, speak like her, and are undocumented like her. The professors at the university prompt and encourage a community of support that resembles a family environment, which is important for the many young students who are not only away from home, but whose culture does not promote leaving home to go to college. Sofía feels the undocumented community, which is significant mainly due to the in-state tuition rates for this population, truly comes together to support one another. For instance, during mid-terms and finals weeks, many

of the immigrant students will often organize study groups to help each other prepare for the exams, motivating each other to succeed.

Understanding students and their needs. Overall, Sofía's institution provides an inviting environment, particularly to those students who speak Spanish. The local community, largely comprised of Mexican-American (third or more generations), appreciates young people who can speak Spanish, and those of Mexican descent feel particularly welcome and at home mainly as a result of the students themselves, such as those involved in student services and clubs. For instance, the language-learning center and organizations such as MEChA, make it feasible and pleasant for students to get involved beyond academics. MEChA, in particular, has been one of the reasons Sofía has made many friends, feels like a contributing citizen, and is motivated to persist in her college education.

Sofía urges universities to educate their staff to serve the populations represented in the school. If the school has or is interested in recruiting undocumented students, the faculty and staff need to have some sort of understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds as well as the resources that would be most beneficial. Also, information in the home language would be helpful if the university wants to involve the families. Sofía recalls when her parents traveled from Denver to attend the student/parent orientation at her university and all the presentations and written information were only in English. This made her parents feel extremely uncomfortable and humiliated, as her mother described it: *“Fue medio humillante estar allí, o sea no entendemos nada, hija. A la otra mayor te vienes tú sola.* (It was kind of humiliating to be there; we don't understand

anything, baby. Next time you should come by yourself.)” Although it is difficult to have an orientation in multiple languages, an attempt to have interpreters would be helpful and supportive to the families. Ironically, many of the professors speak Spanish, yet there were not any interpretation services offered to Sofía’s family.

Future plans. Sofía has just two semesters remaining before she graduates. After graduation, one of her options is to return to Denver and live with her parents until she finds a job and can afford to live on her own. “As a social worker, I have so many paths to choose. Maybe I will continue my involvement in community organization doing some kind of immigration reform work or even school and education reform, or may go into the ‘crime part’ of social work.” Sofía is certain she will find a job in Denver since it is a big city compared to where she has been for the last four years. If Sofía did not have the obstacle of her immigration status, another plan would be to pursue social work in Saudi Arabia since she believes her work could help people in this country. She is confined to the United States, however, until she resolves her legal status.

The only way I can travel outside of the country is for reasons such as a death in the family. So it would be really hard for me to get a job in Saudi Arabia without going there first, but I really want to go there. That’s my ultimate goal, but right now, because of my legal status, I have to stay in the country.

Staying in the country is Sofía’s alternative plan which is as a result of her undocumented status. For now, she is placing her actual plans and hopes for the near future on hold.

When I asked Sofía about her future aspirations or where she sees herself in 10 years, she quickly responded with a charismatic smile, “I think I will be out of the

country.” She expressed she will likely not return to Mexico because the United States is the only country she can really call home. She wishes she could go to Mexico to visit family and visit all of those beautiful places people talk about. “There’s so many places that I’ve never been to in Mexico, and I hear so many Americans that are like, ‘Oh yeah, Mexico is beautiful; I’ve been to over here and over there,’ and I’m like, ‘F*#%, I am Mexican, and I don’t even know those places’—that sucks.” She reiterated that she desperately wishes she could live in Saudi Arabia for a few years doing social work; she also adds that selecting this field of study was the best career path she could’ve selected in college as it is the best avenue to make a difference for other people.

Hoping . . . waiting . . . hoping. “I hope I can get my papers, my citizenship. Right now if an immigration reform is approved, I know I qualify for it, so I really hope an immigration reform passes at most in the next five years. If not, I will lose all hope [laughs nervously].” Sofía spoke of how long she has waited and worked for an immigration reform. She explained how some people, feeling hopeless and fearful, resort to other means such as an arranged marriage to acquire legal status. Sofía giggled as she said, “I really don’t want to get married just to get ‘papers,’ so I hope I get my citizenship.” She shared that if she had legal status, she could travel, fulfill her goal of working in Saudi Arabia, and still be able to come to the United States to visit her parents in the years she lives abroad. She recognizes that she can always return to Mexico and travel from there to essentially any place in the world, but that would mean not seeing her parents and other family members for a much longer time.

The true dreamers. In Sofía's final remarks she called for a comprehensive reform. Although the country is talking about legalization of students, "the dreamers," she knows such reform would not include her parents. Sofía's poignant statements hit a close chord almost bringing me to tears:

Everyone calls us the dreamers; they say we are the dreamers, but I think the real dreamers in our stories are our parents because they are the ones who brought us here, and they are the ones who had all the hopes. They put their lives and even the life of their own precious children at risk coming to the United States because they had this dream—a better future for us. They are the real dreamers.

Sofía affirms many students are here because of their parents; because their parents were brave enough to come to a country even when they had no idea what they were going to do once they arrived here. Sofía pleads for a reform that would also include the parents. ". . . It's so . . . *no es lógico estar separando a las familias*. (It's not logical to be separating families.)" Sofía is protected from deportation through the deferred action program, but other members of her family do not have this protection. A deportation could immediately split the family apart.

Raúl

Raúl was the third participant selected; he was identified employing the snowball sampling technique. I first made contact with Raúl via phone. When I explained the study to him, he seemed highly interested, so we set up the first interview to take place within a couple of days. The site of the interview was a small office at my work place since this location turned out to be the most convenient for Raúl. When he came for the first interview, I walked out of my office to meet him at the parking lot; we were both on our cell phones trying to locate one another. As I walked through the parking lot, I spotted a young man in the distance with a relaxed stride coming towards me. I was thrilled to meet my third participant for the first time. When we finally met midpoint, I formally introduced myself, we shook hands, and I made small talk, asking him about the commute to my work place as I guided him towards the office where the interviews took place. Raúl seemed polite, yet reserved. Although we had discussed the study over the phone, as I went over the consent form in detail, Raúl still seemed uncertain about his role in my dissertation. I made sure he was clear about the purpose of the study and the involved risks, as well as the contribution his story could make.

I thanked Raúl for his time, for accepting to be part of my study, and I continued the small talk to make him feel comfortable. I talked to him about myself and gave him a brief version of my journey from a young immigrant to a PhD candidate. I described my hometown in Mexico as I set up the recording device, and this seemed to help us connect because he is from Mexico as well. It didn't take long for Raúl to warm up in the first interview; his countenance showed he was not only relaxed but also excited to get started.

Family separation. “I was born in a large town near the beach—more rural than it is here. But people I have spoken with think we [people from this town] are savages, but we are not. It is a pretty nice place, actually.” Raúl was born in the second largest city of a southern state in Mexico. While living in Mexico, Raúl’s family was comprised of his parents and his maternal grandparents; Raúl was an only child at that time. Raúl’s parents got divorced when he was five years old. Shortly thereafter, Raúl’s mom decided to come to the United States, leaving Raúl in the care of his grandparents. Raúl thinks his mom just needed a radical change after the divorce: “She had a college degree in Mexico. I don’t think finding a job would’ve been hard. I guess she just wanted something new—a new life since she had gotten divorced.” Although Raúl was suddenly separated from both his father, due to the divorce, and from his mother, due to her departure, he remembers enjoying his life in Mexico. He enjoyed being cared for by his grandma, attending school for most of his elementary grades, and he certainly enjoyed playing soccer with his friends practically every afternoon.

When his mom returned to Mexico to visit Raúl two years after she had left, she promised him she would either come back to Mexico indefinitely or find a way to bring him with her to the United States. A couple of years later, she sent for Raúl, fulfilling her promise. Raúl crossed the border with one of his mother’s acquaintances using another child’s documentation.

What I did is my mom knew this lady and she basically, she had a nephew, so I basically crossed as her nephew. She had her nephew’s birth certificate and everything. But it was hard because as I was crossing, I knew they were going to

ask me questions and I did not speak English. So I did not know what to say. She [the lady] just said we're about to cross the checkpoint and to pretend I'm sleeping so that's what I did. I had already tried to cross once before, but she needed her sister's permission, so she first had to fax it over to Mexico. . . . The first time I crossed, they did ask me questions, and I did not know what to say. So the second time she asked me to pretend to fall asleep, so I did, and they did not ask me any questions.

According to Raúl, while this was a difficult and daunting situation, he was happy to be reunited with his mom.

Assimilation. When Raúl came to the United States, he was about 10 years old, so he was enrolled in 5th grade. Raúl doesn't quite remember what his expectations were of the United States school system; however, he does remember it was different, mainly because he did not speak English. He was placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class with a teacher who spoke Spanish and had experience in teaching students who did not speak English yet. Raúl clearly remembers his experience the first day: "I was put in an ESL class, and the first day I went, the teacher was not there, so I had a substitute. I did not know how to communicate with her." This was quite a disconcerting encounter for a young boy on his first day of school in an unfamiliar environment. For Raúl, the cultural shock was felt even when communicating with students who spoke Spanish. He recalls the Spanish being "different" and many words incomprehensible to him:

I guess it was pretty different because of the language. Even Spanish was spoken differently than I spoke it. You know, like, let's say "*troca*." I had never heard of that word until I came here. I would say to them, "I've never heard that. What is a *troca*?" I didn't know what it was, so they explained it's a truck. So I said, "What is a truck"? because I did not know the word [in English] either.

Nevertheless, Raúl recalls rapidly making friends. He recollects a particular young boy from Sudan who, despite the language barrier, quickly became one of his closest friends.

When Raúl enrolled in school in the United States, he noticed some differences compared to his experience in Mexico. With regards to academics, Raúl expressed he was highly advanced in math when he came to the United States. Similarly, Raúl felt that the science content was different from what was covered in Mexico; however he did well in the subject. As far as the physical structure of his new school, he enjoyed the grass on the fields as opposed to the cement at his school in Mexico. He also enjoyed the cafeteria lunch, which was a new concept for him. "Over there, lunch is you take your own lunch, or you can buy like a *torta* (sandwich) or something. Outside there are booths or people selling food to students. Over here we just have free lunch in the cafeteria, which was pretty cool."

Raúl quickly assimilated to the new school system and he actually enjoyed school. While Raúl was not the type of kid who would think a lot about what he wanted to do as a profession, one thing Raúl was certain about was that he was going to attend college since his mother expected him to do so. He really liked history in high school, so he considered majoring in history in college. His high school history teacher however,

discouraged him because he believed majoring in this field would limit his job possibilities. There was also a time when Raúl considered majoring in psychology, but before long, he changed his mind. Raúl has never been known as an “overachiever” or someone who is willing to go the extra mile. As such, he wanted to major in an area in which he could easily get a job in a variety of settings.

Although Raúl came to the United States at an age old enough to realize he was not from this country, he really didn’t realize he was undocumented, let alone the impacts of such a status. In fact, he assimilated so well that it was not until his junior or senior year in high school when he realized that his legal status presented daunting challenges in continuing his post-secondary education. In his final year, Raúl began to engage in all of the phases of the college preparation process such as applying for college admission and financial aid. Raúl vividly remembers the experience when he was made aware of his legal status:

In high school, we had what was called the Future Center, which was basically a place where there was a lady who was in charge of getting everyone to apply for colleges and stuff— it’s like a guidance counselor—and she did; everyone got accepted to at least a community college. So basically one time she called me out of class, and about 20 other students, and we were in a room and she told us that we all qualified for the Adamson scholarship, and she said, “You may qualify for this scholarship, and so we’re going to review the criteria.” Basically she said you have to have a GPA above this, so I thought, “Okay, I have that.” She went down the list, and I pretty much had everything. Then she said, “If you don’t have a

Social Security number, you don't qualify for this." I didn't know if I had that. So

I talked to her, and she said, "If you're undocumented, you don't have one."

Raúl recalls this as the experience that made him realize he was undocumented.

Raúl's undocumented status quickly became a harsh reality as he learned the implications of what it meant to be undocumented. He was disheartened, and varying degrees of uncertainty and insecurity troubled his mind. "I thought, 'I'm not going to go to the school where I want to go. I'm not going to do what I wanted to do.' I was kind of depressed for a while." Despite the discouraging revelation of his situation, he was persistent in his goal to go to college; as such, he continued to visit the school's Future Center regularly. The counselor told him that despite his status, he did qualify for some scholarships, and she periodically provided him different applications to complete.

. . . But the scholarships that I qualified for were like \$200 scholarships. And this guy that I knew since middle school, and others, had lower GPAs than me, and they qualified for scholarships that gave them a lot more money. I thought, "That's not fair!" I deserved more than that, and I would tell her [the counselor] that. She would say she was sorry and that she couldn't do anything about that.

Raúl was a good student; he had a high GPA and wanted to go to college, but that "minor" detail, an undocumented status, placed him at the bottom of the list below everybody else with a legal status.

College life. Raúl received most of the information about college from the counselor at the Future Center of his high school. Nonetheless, the encouragement to attend college came not only from faculty at his school but from his immediate family as

well. At school, his teachers consistently encouraged Raúl to go to college. For instance, when there was a free period in his schedule, he was assigned to a teacher as her aide since the school did not like students to just have “free” periods. Raúl helped this teacher, who had lunch during the time he was with her, so they would sit in her office while she ate lunch and Raúl graded papers. His teacher would take this daily opportunity to encourage Raúl to attend college and to do something to help his community, particularly Hispanic children. She asked Raúl to look around and see how many of the teachers at the school were Hispanic, and the need for more Hispanic teachers and professionals overall. Raúl knew this was true; even though 90% of the student population was Hispanic, 90% of the faculty was White. Raúl began to question the curriculum taught in high school because it did not represent the Hispanic students, which comprised the vast majority of the student body.

His family, particularly his mom, always “pushed” him to go to college. She told him regularly that he was going to college after he graduated from high school. She also reminded him that a lot of their family in Mexico had graduated from college, and his mom did not want him to be the only one not to have a college education. Raúl held his mom in high regard since she had acquired a college degree herself. In fact, she was pregnant with him as she attended college. “So I think it was pretty cool she still went to school and raised a child at the same time.”

Although Raúl originally planned to remain in Colorado, when he selected his current out-of-state university, the decision was mostly based on cost: “Well I decided to attend [current university] because it was one of the cheapest schools in the United

States.” He learned about his current college through the Future Center. His high school promoted this university because several of its alumni were already attending and doing well. In fact, one of the alumni was in charge of the university’s student ambassador program, and she reached out to the counselor at the Future Center to promote the university. After a presentation about the university at his high school, Raúl decided to apply and made plans to attend the fall semester after high school graduation. One of his high school friends planned to attend with him, but in the end, he did not show up, so Raúl embarked on this new chapter in his life alone. Raúl was nervous because he was attending college out of state, and he was not going to know anybody. Nonetheless, he was extremely excited, mainly to have the “freedom that comes with living away from home,” as he stated with a cheery smile.

When Raúl first visited the university for orientation, his immediate impression was that the town was quite small; he considers himself a big-city guy. “It was surprising how small it was, and how all the stereotypes of the Midwest come to life in that town.” Raúl was equally surprised with the small size of his classes at the university. His teachers in high school always talked about how college classes have 100 or 200 students per class, yet only a couple of his classes were somewhat large, and actually most of them were only about 10 to 20 students. He expected large classes with a “bunch of super smart students” wherein he thought he would feel as if he were stupid. “I guess I always pictured college with people who were very smart, with their iPads. . . I thought, ‘I’m going to be so stupid there,’ but that was not the case.” Another expectation Raúl held was that the university would have some kind of Latino fraternity similar to those at some

of the campuses he had visited in Colorado. He expected this kind of program to support the large Hispanic population at the university. This was not the case, however he did find other clubs that he soon joined.

Raúl's first year of college was not as rigorous or stressful as he had expected. Yet, he feels that while his high school teachers claimed they were preparing him for college, he now realizes there were many skills he was not taught. For instance, he feels there should have been more opportunities for writing essays as this skill is highly utilized in college. One skill he did acquire in high school was how to take good notes, which has helped him immensely in college. Raúl's high school teachers often talked about how attendance at the college level was not a requirement as it was in high school; however, Raúl's university has a fairly strict attendance policy. In his program, if students are absent more than two days without a valid excuse, they are dropped from the class.

Family support. In addition to attending school full time, Raúl works during summer and winter breaks off campus, as well as throughout the school year refereeing soccer games on campus, to pay for his tuition and personal expenses. His family also helps financially, and even though he does not have any scholarships at this time, he does have a grant from the university that allows him to pay in-state tuition, which is extremely helpful. Because Raúl does not qualify for any type of financial aid due to his undocumented status, paying for school has been rather difficult. As Raúl talked about family finances, he began to tear up remembering the time his mother got sick, adding to their financial hardships, forcing him to leave school temporarily and come back to

Denver. He also recalled that during one of his visits home he hurt his leg playing soccer and had to be taken to the emergency room. That bill amounted to around \$5,000.

Luckily, the family received some financial assistance and only had to pay \$800.

Unexpected expenses such as these have made it even more difficult to pay for Raúl's education. These hard times have made Raúl consider returning home and attending a local college part-time. While this would free him up to work more hours and make more money to support his family, it would prolong his ultimate goal of obtaining his bachelor's degree.

A supportive faculty. Although Raúl is a rather reserved young man, he does not refrain from asking questions in class or asking for assistance outside of class time. His interactions with faculty are polite and normal student-professor interactions. Raúl's pleasant personality enables him to get along well with all professors, and that allows him to feel comfortable seeking out academic support as needed. All of Raúl's professors have office hours and are always available to answer students' questions. The university is like a small, friendly community. For instance, if one of Raúl's professors is working out at the gym, it is not uncommon for faculty to join the students as they work out. Other than a few instances such as this, Raúl has cordial, yet limited interactions with faculty outside of class.

In class, Raúl feels supported by his teachers. Since classes are small, the class structure lends itself to meeting individual student needs and addressing their questions:

The classes are small, so if someone has a question about an assignment, we can stop class so everyone understands what the assignment is, and answer whatever

the question the person had. I like that. For the most part, teachers have the class, the lecture itself, very structured—they know exactly what they're going to talk about.

It is the individualized attention that allows Raúl's professors to get to know him on a personal basis despite his reserved personality.

Raúl's professors have commented that they see him as a quiet student who should participate more in class and share his opinion, and they consistently encourage him to do so since they believe he can offer so much to the class. Raúl recalls an instance when one of his English professors asked him why he didn't say much in class:

[My professor] told me at the end of the semester that I had to meet with him to talk about the final paper. At this time I was a sophomore, and this class was about a junior-level class. He told me that for a junior-level class I knew my stuff, but it would've been better if I had participated more in the class. I answered that I would have, but the stuff they talked about in class was a lot about political topics from the 70s, and how comedians talked about them then. Almost all topics were from the past, not much recent, so I told him that I wasn't born here so a lot of the things that we talked about I kind of had read about in high school in some classes I had taken, but it wasn't something that I was really knowledgeable about. But he said that a foreigner's opinion would matter, and that just because you are unsure of what you think, you shouldn't be scared to bring it up because it matters.

This is another advantage of a small class setting, the professors can monitor student participation. The class structure also allows for group work or presentations, although most of the assignments entail individual essay writing.

Raúl feels his professors acknowledge and value his background and recognize his achievements. Often professors make statements to Raúl such as, “way to go” and “I’m glad you are going to school.” Although Raúl does not like being put on the spot, particularly when the subject is about immigrants, Mexican-American students, or undocumented students, he appreciates the fact that professors are supportive and value his views and opinions.

Respectful and supportive peers. Through the interviews, it became quite apparent that peer interactions are important to Raúl. In class, interactions with peers are respectful and supportive. Outside of class, he gets along well with everyone, and since his first semester at the university, he has been able to make good friends, which is something he really did not expect. Overall, Raúl thinks people on the campus are “easy to talk to.”

Student services—a different story. Raúl doesn’t utilize many of the student services offered by his university. He does access the writing and math/science tutoring centers, but it is mainly to use the computers and print. He finds the writing center helpful since the tutors are always willing to offer their expertise. The student support service office staff such as the registrar, however, comes across as rather rude, according to Raúl. Students are offered little information and assistance; information to students is “delivered” in boxes outside of the office containing forms for the different services

offered. It appears as though the office staff is not well trained or aware of support services available to different student groups:

Like the grant I was telling you about, I didn't get it for about a year and a half because I didn't know about it until a friend told me, "If you graduated from high school in Colorado, you qualify for this grant [in-state tuition]." So I was paying about \$1,000 extra each semester, and I guess the people in the registrar's office didn't know about it. So my friend told me about it, and then I found the papers on the wall, so I guess they expect you to just grab the paper. Now that I know, I just go to the office and grab the paper and fill it out every semester, but if you don't know . . . ?

Raúl recalls one specific, extremely uncomfortable incident during orientation when a staff member from the financial aid office asked him about the amount of financial aid he receives:

He asked me how much I get for financial aid, and I said I didn't qualify for financial aid. He asked, "Why not?" Then I said that I just didn't. Then I said I didn't have a Social Security number. Then he asked why, and that if it was because I am illegal. And I said, "I guess." He just said, "Ok—that's fine." But the way he asked me, I thought it was rude, that if it was because I'm illegal.

Raúl stated occurrences such as this one demonstrate the need for universities to intentionally work on developing a culturally sensitive environment with non-faculty staff so students do not feel embarrassed or are treated inappropriately as he was.

Extracurricular involvement. Considering Raúl's reserved and rather diffident personality, it was slightly confounding to learn about the multiple activities and clubs in which he has participated since he started at the university. Similarly, it was interesting to learn how he enjoys meeting different people, making new friends, and getting involved in school events. "My first semester there I found out that they had a soccer club, so I joined that right away. That was pretty cool because there were people from all over the world. There were people from Africa, from Japan—and I liked it." Raúl also joined the school's Asian Club because one of his close friends was the president of the club. Raúl describes this club as an experience he really enjoyed.

. . . I liked it because we would get together and cook Asian food. My friend, who I met through the soccer team, he's a political science major, he said I could join if I wanted, and I said okay. He said to just come to the meeting, so I went. The next time we met at his house and cooked, kind of like a potluck, and I really enjoyed it.

In addition to the clubs, Raúl attends some basketball games since one of his friends is on the basketball team. He also frequently attends the women's soccer games because he knows some of the players who often come and play with the team members on the men's soccer club. Interestingly, while the university has a women's soccer team, it does not have a men's team—only a club.

Raúl also likes participating in some of the community and university events. Some of these events are hosted by different student groups (e.g., clubs, dormitory buildings), and others are hosted by the local community. "It's cool because the

community gets to see, you know, *convivir* (retreat) with the students, so the community and the students get together. I think that's pretty cool because it's a small town." As Raúl described these community events, we both laughed trying to find a word that would truly define the term *convivir* in English. We chuckled thinking of ways to translate it so to truly convey what it really means when people *convive* in a harmonious, amicable way. Raúl suggested terms such as "hang-out" or "get-together." However, we both agreed that the word in Spanish really has a more meaningful connotation that cannot be expressed in English.

Raúl also talked about some of the events the dormitories have from time to time: "One time we played *lotería* (Mexican bingo)." He added with a chuckle, "A lot of them didn't know what it was so we had to explain to them." In addition to game nights, students often plan study groups during midterms and finals as a way to "hang out together" and help each other do well academically.

The driving forces to college persistence. Raul attributes his success to several key individuals who have encouraged him to persevere. "I guess all the help that I have received from my family, my friends, my professors. They've all inspired me to believe in myself and progress through it [college]. They inspire me by telling me they're proud of me." He added further, "I would even say that more from high school because they're [teachers] the ones who pushed us a lot to get there."

Raúl has a supportive family that helps him financially with college the best they can. His mother, in particular, has been a driving force for him to persist in college. She consistently asks Raúl how he is doing in school, what classes he is taking and how many

credits he has for the semester. His younger brother also has many questions for Raúl regarding his university. “I asked him [my brother] if he’s going to go to college, and he says yeah because I went to college, and he doesn’t want to be left behind.” The family support has been especially critical during the times when Raúl has been ready to give up:

I’ve called and said that I do not want to do this; I just want to get this over with, and they [the family] remind me that I’m almost done. Not this semester but the one before that, it was really stressful for me; I called my mom and I said I just want to go home already. She reminded me I’m almost done, not to worry, that I have only three semesters left, to just push through it, that it will be worth it.

Raúl is in constant communication with his family. They talk at least once a week on the phone, through Skype or any other method they can utilize.

Insights for post-secondary institutions. Although Raúl has had positive experiences at his university, he also has some feedback as to what the university can do to further support students like himself. For example, the university needs to be more familiar with diverse populations and their needs so that the appropriate resources are provided in order to support their success (e.g., information on scholarships they qualify for, and work study information for students with their DACA permit). Moreover, the university needs to establish structures that allow the various ethnic populations that are represented to get more involved in their school, for instance, information in various languages about clubs and events as well as culturally sensitive curriculum that integrates various points of view into the university’s culture. Raúl strongly believes that when

students feel they are part of the university versus merely students attending the university, they are more likely to persevere. Clubs and organizations are a great way for students to make friends and build relationships that can give a sense of belonging away from home. Lastly, although financial support and affordable tuition are great incentives to attract and retain the undocumented population, Raúl believes that maintaining a high standard of academics that truly prepares its students to be competitive in the workforce is essential. Raúl recalled one of his English teachers in particular, from his freshman or sophomore year, who demanded high-quality work from all students to prepare them for the future:

He would tell us he wanted to make our degree worth what we were working for.

I like that. He is not handing me what [the grade] I'm getting; he is making me work for it. His class has helped me out a lot now that I am writing more papers. I don't see a lot of grammar or spelling errors. A lot of my friends now [in their senior year] struggle, and I tell them if they had had his class, they would've suffered, but they would be better writers.

Raúl embraces the high expectations that challenge him to be a better writer—one skill he deems fundamental as he enters the competitive professional world.

DACA—A temporary positive outlook. Raúl has just two semesters left before graduation. He is still uncertain about his plans after he graduates. He and a friend have thought about going to Spain. He is interested in an eight-month program working as an English teacher/assistant. He has been looking at the application and requirements online, but he is still unsure this is the route he will take. Raúl is eligible to apply for DACA, but

as of now, he has not pursued that option. If he does choose to apply and is granted DACA, he can leave the country for employment reasons. This is still a risky situation since DACA has to be renewed every two years, and the executive order regarding DACA can change at any time. If a change were to occur while he is out of the United States, he may not be able to re-enter legally. Raúl knows taking such a risk would mean he might not be able to come back to see his family.

Raúl's plans after college are contingent upon a resolution to his legal status. If he were able to obtain permanent legal status, he would have more viable options: "I would have more freedom to do anything I choose, and my options would be unlimited." His plans in the next 5 to 10 years are to have at least a master's degree in social work, and perhaps even be working on his PhD. For Raúl, a PhD would be more of a personal goal; he considers obstacles (e.g., undocumented status, limited financial resources, and language barriers) as driving forces that motivate him to go far beyond what is expected of him. Raúl perceives a PhD as a tremendous accomplishment for someone with dissuading circumstances such as his uncertain immigration status. Regarding his future legal status, Raúl is hopeful for a positive outcome:

I would say I would have fixed my immigration status [in 5 to 10 years]. What I really want to do is travel. So I say from five years from now even if I'm still undocumented, I would just leave so I can travel around the world. . . . If I'm legalized, it would be easier for me because if I travel I can come back and see my family.

As of now, Raúl plans to apply for DACA so that when he graduates in nine months, he has more opportunities than now—perhaps employment in or out of the United States. Of course, the ultimate goal is obtaining legal status.

Susana

Susana, the fourth participant in the study was recruited through snowball sampling. After emailing Susana information about the study, and corresponding several times back and forth with questions, answers, and paperwork, the first interview was scheduled. This was the first and only set of interviews that was not face-to-face since Susana is currently residing outside of Colorado. I had a bit of anxiety about potential difficulties doing the interviews via technology devices, particularly because I was meeting Susana for the first time and was unsure if technology would hinder our opportunity to develop rapport. The first interview was scheduled on a Tuesday at 8:00 p.m., but after failed attempts trying to connect using Skype, Google chat, and FaceTime on two different computers, a tablet and a cell phone, the interview was rescheduled for the next day. I was frustrated, feeling I was wasting Susana's precious time since she did not have internet access in her home and that meant she would have to either stay late at work, or go to an Internet cafe for the interviews. The first interview wound up taking place a couple of days after the original scheduled time. As it turns out, Susana participated in the interview from an Internet cafe. Despite all of the technological issues, Susana's easy-going, funny, and interesting personality made all of my worries disappear the minute I started conversing with her.

Escaping domestic violence. Susana was born in a border town of Mexico and is the youngest of three girls. Her parents are originally from the northwestern part of Mexico and had relocated to the border town right after marriage to seek better employment opportunities. Susana's parents separated when she was approximately five years old due to physical abuse her mother suffered from her father. When Susana was six years old, her mom decided to flee the country because Susana's father continuously made threats to take the girls from her: "You know, they were having a lot of issues. They were already separated, but my dad was threatening her [mom] with getting us away from her. She was already a single mom, so she decided to go to Colorado." Susana's mom immigrated to Colorado to reside with her sister, and she sent the girls back to her hometown to be in the care of their grandmother and aunt. As Susana reminisced about her stay with her grandmother and aunt, she clearly remembers two details: they were very poor, and all three sisters missed their mother dearly. Her mother stayed in close communication with the girls while she worked to save up for her daughters to join her.

Susana's mom worked for several months in Colorado until she saved enough money to return to Mexico to pick up her girls. The four of them, Susana's mother and the three girls, entered the United States by essentially walking across the bridge as American citizens. Her mother's light complexion and hair color made it possible for her to simply walk across. The three girls intermingled through the crowded and busy lines at the checkpoint, passing inadvertently due to their young age. Susana laughs as she recalls the experience and recognizes she would not be able to "pull it off" now that she is older

and now that security measures at the borders have been substantially strengthened.

Luckily, they all made it to Colorado successfully.

A safe haven. Susana did not anticipate how difficult school would be in the United States. She was enrolled in a school that did not have any English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Thus, Susana was placed in mainstream classes, which led to what she describes as a “hard time learning.” Yet, the language was not the only barrier to learning since she also struggled in school when she was in Mexico. In fact, she has vivid memories of being punished for not performing satisfactorily in the Mexican schools. Since her mom worked many hours, it was actually her uncle who executed the physical punishments that resulted from getting in trouble at school.

Despite the academic struggles in Susana’s early years of schooling, she was happy to be in Colorado—she saw her new home as a “safe haven”: After living away from their mother, Susana was happy to be wherever her mom was. “Education wasn’t a priority.”

I only knew we were going to have a better future. . . . I was so young. I just knew we were running away from my dad, so the rest didn’t matter to me. Like, education didn’t matter or school or anything like that. I just knew we were going to be in a better place moving away from my dad.

When Susana entered the 5th grade, things started to change for her. She was fortunate to be adopted by the I Have a Dream Foundation. This foundation adopts students with at-risk factors (e.g., poverty, English language needs) and provides them with supports such as tutoring and mentoring to ensure their educational success.

Through the foundation, Susana was able to go on fieldtrips and do volunteer work that allowed her to explore different careers. At this young age, Susana was determined to go to college. She perceived this as an attainable goal because she knew she could potentially receive a scholarship from the foundation.

Middle school was definitely better for Susana since she had already acquired English. As such, her middle school years were uneventful. Sadly, by her first year of high school, Susana had lost interest in school, and her grades and attitude reflected it. Most of this change was due to the fact that Susana saw her oldest sister, who had graduated from high school, struggle unsuccessfully to attend college. Her sister went off to work right after high school and was unable to get the financial and parental support she needed to continue her education. Without any role models to follow, Susana became discouraged from pursuing her goals.

In addition to Susana's low academic performance, during her freshman and part of her sophomore year, she started getting into fights and other trouble in and out of school. In the second semester of her sophomore year, Susana joined a variety of sports at school, which became the incentive that motivated her to turn herself around. She was required to get good grades to be eligible to participate in sports, so she improved her academics. Her math teacher, who was also her wrestling coach, played a significant role in getting Susana to improve her grades. Although Susana was still not an "A" student, she was making "Bs" or "Cs" in all her classes. Then, just as Susana was turning her life around, her mom decided to take the girls out of school to temporarily move back to Mexico.

A lesson to be learned. Susana's mother had a few reasons to take the girls back to Mexico. For one, Susana's grandmother was ill, and this was an opportune reason to go spend some time with the extended family. Also, Susana's mother wanted the girls to experience what it was like to live in Mexico because they were very young when they emigrated. Susana believes the main reason, however, was to teach the girls a lesson about life. According to Susana, her mother is a "strong woman"; therefore, she decided to show her daughters the "real world." As such, during their stay in Mexico, the family traveled to Mexico City and stayed there for a month. There, they had an opportunity to see "real poverty."

So, she [Susana's mom] sold her house, sold everything, and we went back to Mexico. Spending time with the family was great. I also had my *Quinceañera* (coming of age celebration) there, so the party was great (chuckles). My mom wanted us to experience the real life and how people live there. I started working at a *maquiladora* (factory). I was getting paid. . . I worked 10 hours per day, and I was getting paid 500 *pesos*, about 40 U.S. dollars per week. We also decided to travel, so we took a month to travel from [mom's place of birth], where we were living, to *El DF* (Mexico City). We took about a month of traveling. In Mexico you really see poverty, you really see everything. So it was very cool that my mom did that for us, with us.

Susana's mother regarded this trip as a lesson her three girls needed to learn. It was definitely a life lesson for Susana. Because Susana had extremely limited Spanish skills, she was not admitted into a "regular" school. She actually attended a music school for a

short period of time during her stay in Mexico. “That [school] had nothing to do with me.” She left that school and that is when she started working for basically pennies per hour.

A 180° change. After seven months in Mexico, the family decided to return to the United States. At that time, Susana’s mother already had a legal permit to enter the United States, but Susana and her sisters did not. Once again, they had to cross without appropriate documentation. Susana crossed over the Mexico-United States bridge with a visa that did not belong to her. She successfully crossed all by herself. One of her sisters and her uncle attempted to cross that same day under the same circumstances, but they were both detained and consequently served time for a period of two or three months.

Susana had certainly learned the lesson her mother wanted to teach her, which was that despite the economic and undocumented status struggles, she had more opportunities in the United States. Once back in Colorado, Susana decided to make a drastic change in her life and focus all her energy on her academic performance and recover the required credits to graduate from high school on time. Her days of failing classes and getting into fights were over. As she describes it, “she straightened out” after seeing extreme poverty, and how much people struggle to barely survive in Mexico. She was determined, more than ever, to finish high school.

When I came back, I wanted to do well in school. I wanted to go to college, so my junior and senior years were tough because I was doing sophomore and junior classes at the same time to be able to graduate on time. And so was my sister. My

sister and I, we both really wanted to go to school [college]; we just didn't know where or how.

Susana was doing so well in school that she became the recipient of a very prestigious full-ride scholarship her senior year.

“Taken Away.” Susana was extremely excited when her school notified her that she was selected to receive a full-ride scholarship, which is granted annually to a number of students in Colorado.

. . . . Yeah (sighs), then they took it away because I was undocumented. That's when I realized that I couldn't stay in Colorado even though I had tried my best to do whatever was possible for me to go to [Colorado university], which was my dream school at the time. And I wanted to stay at home or as close as possible.

When Susana was informed that as a recipient of the scholarship she still needed to complete a FAFSA application and her social security number was required, her well-kept secret came to light:

When I was in high school, I didn't tell anyone I was undocumented, so my principal [who nominated her for the scholarship] did not know. I lived under the shadows. You don't speak a lot about those things, and honestly I didn't speak about it to anyone until I came to college. . . . I was going to fill out the FAFSA, and they wanted my Social Security Number, and I thought, “I don't have one.” I think at first I told them, “I don't know it—I'll come back tomorrow” or something like that. So when they found out, they said, “Oh. You cannot apply. You can't have the scholarship.”

Even though Susana was devastated, she was still determined to go to college. Her dream school and her second choice were financially impossible, but there were other options available.

Truly a dream foundation. After Susana's full-ride scholarship was taken away, she learned that the Dream Foundation, which had supported her since her elementary years, was going to step in and offer her a scholarship that would pay for all four years of college. Susana's undocumented status was not an obstacle to receive the scholarship; however, it still impacted school options given the monetary allowance per year, which was based on in-state tuition rates. As an undocumented student, Susana had to pay out-of-state rates. Nonetheless, this scholarship granted Susana hope to pursue a post-secondary education, and she was extremely appreciative for the opportunity.

Bittersweet. Although Susana was grateful and delighted to have an opportunity to attend college, she was extremely frustrated in the process due to all the limitations that came with her undocumented status. She was frustrated that she did not qualify for many other scholarships, and she was limited to certain colleges she could afford. As it turned out, the most viable option was the out-of-state university she attended. "So it [college access] was very frustrating, and I was pretty pissed off because I couldn't stay at home. I was forced to leave."

Susana remembers as a freshman in high school she dreamt of the days when she would go to college, and leave home to enjoy the freedom she would have without her mother. Yet, when it was time to choose a college, she wanted to stay as close to home as possible. Although the out-of-state university from which Susana eventually graduated

was her last choice, it became her only option due to the low tuition rates it provided to all Colorado students, regardless of their legal status. Susana was excited that she was going to college. She didn't know much about the school, she did not have clear expectations, nor was she ready for the college experience. Yet, this young dreamer was open to this new journey.

College experiences. The first year of college was relatively easy for Susana, and she didn't seem to struggle academically despite her dyslexia, which she discovered that she had in college. Susana, like many of her peers, was enjoying the freedom of going away to college. However, Susana was determined to not allow her fun in college interfere with her goal to graduate; she wanted to graduate in excellent academic standing. She had learned from her mistakes in high school:

I saw my friends partying as much as I did, but they did not go to class, and they failed classes. I feel I am very strong-minded, and even though I was partying as much as I was, on Thursday and Friday I'd make sure I had all my homework done. So as much as I was going out and partying, I always managed to keep a 3.8 or 3.9 GPA. I had really good grades. I think what made me different is I knew what I wanted, and I knew I wouldn't f*#% up like in high school. I wasn't going to mess up and f*#% up my grades like I did my freshman year in high school. So that was different about me. I knew what I wanted, and I would not let partying or hanging out with my friends distract me.

She was also highly focused because there were many people who believed in her, and she could not “let them down.” She had her foundation sponsors and most importantly her mother.

Susana decided to double major in Spanish and media arts. The Spanish major helped her to better acquire her own language, since she had limited formal education in school in Mexico the few months she attended. The media arts classes were especially challenging for her since it was a field out of her comfort zone. In her last year of high school, Susana became highly involved within her community and developed a passion for immigrant issues and equality rights. Both of her college majors complemented her passion and commitment to advocate for the Hispanic undocumented community.

The [only] Mexicana. By the end of Susana’s sophomore year, she had completed most classes for her Spanish major. Although she struggled once she entered the 300- and 400-level Spanish classes, the rigor of college increased significantly when she started focusing on her media arts major her junior year. Despite the change in the type of work, from papers to projects, Susana deeply enjoyed her time in the media arts department: “So even though the classes there were challenging, they were fun. I really enjoyed the media arts classes. I had great professors—these professors knew my struggles.” Susana found the much needed faculty support as the only undocumented student and the only *Mexicana*, as she stated, in the department.

Due to her focus with the undocumented and immigrant population, Susana did most of her projects in Spanish. She referred to her work in her classes as “arts activism.” This type of work allowed her to continue her passion for and involvement in the

immigrant movement. As such, her projects were different from those of other students. Not only were they typically in Spanish, they also portrayed a unique message and purpose, an approach that was not always well accepted:

Every class I had, I was always doing posters depicting undocumented issues. I did a video, an experimental video of people crossing the borders. I did a full cartoon series of *La Llorona* (“The Crying Lady,” a Mexican folktale)—it was for a final, and one of the professors asked me to stop doing projects in Spanish. I asked why—it didn’t make sense. He did apologize the next day. I guess they wanted me to focus on what they wanted to see. For example, in photography, people were doing photo shoots of their models and stupid things like magazines. I was coming up with photo-shoots of people wearing caps and gowns with duct tape on their mouths stating, “Do I look illegal”?

A change agent. Since her freshman year in college, Susana was very involved in the immigrant movement. She became a member of the MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos/Chicanas de Aztlan—Student Movement of Chicanos/Chicanas from Aztlan* [Aztlan means a promise land]) Club, a school club that attempted to bring together the Mexican-American community in the school. Susana soon became the president, and the club became one of the biggest clubs on the small campus, with over 50 members. Under Susana’s leadership, the role of the club also changed significantly as they became the voice and the greatest advocates for the immigrant and undocumented population of the school, and eventually the town, the state, and the nation. The majority of the club members, approximately 90%, were undocumented. This did not deter the club from

organizing informational conferences, marches and other forms of activism, fund raising, and even dialoguing with state government officials to address critical immigrant issues.

MEChA was extremely successful in making changes in the university for the benefit of immigrant and undocumented students—for instance, MEChA was instrumental in creating a system to ensure students receive accurate information regarding available waivers, scholarships, and other financial supports regardless of legal status. More importantly, they were successful in educating the faculty and staff in understanding the background and the educational and non-educational needs of this population. Under Susana's leadership, the club received the school's Club of the Year Award. Overall, Susana's work in MEChA has had a great positive impact on the immigrant and undocumented community on and off campus, and it has transcended Susana's time as the club's president and at the university.

Beyond supportive. Due to her leadership in MEChA, Susana was well known among the faculty, particularly with the professors in the Chicano studies and Spanish departments. "Everybody knew the type of work we were doing, and the majority of them [the professors] were very supportive." Because of the relatively small size of the university, the majority of the professors work with many undocumented students. As such, professors seem to perceive the undocumented status matters MEChA presents (e.g., financial aid and in-state tuition) as relevant, and often get involved in helping to resolve them by collaborating with members of MEChA. In general, they are highly supportive of all the decisions and changes the club has made for the "dreamers," how the undocumented students were often referred to at the university.

Two of Susana's professors went beyond the call of duty to support Susana in and out of the classroom. One of them was her advisor from MEChA, who was "like a dad" to Susana:

My advisor from MEChA, man, he became like a dad to us [Susana and other students]. He was also my mentor, so whatever I needed he's the one I went to. If it was to talk about my organizing skills, or if I needed to do a resume, or if I just needed to talk—I was very lucky to have him, that's important. . . . For Thanksgiving, many times we couldn't go home because we couldn't afford it—we were really broke—so he would take us to his house to have Thanksgiving dinner with him and his family. Even in the weekends, if we were bored, we'd go to his house. His wife also loved us (giggles), and she'd make us food. We were also friends with his daughter; we became friends with the whole family. Even when we wanted to come home to Colorado, if he was going somewhere in that direction, we would catch a ride with him (chuckles). He even met my parents—he knows my parents—and has been very supportive of all of us.

Susana also talked sincerely about another professor from the Spanish department who went above and beyond to support students. She supported Susana as an "organizer" (this is the term Susana used to describe herself in regards to the work she did as the leader of MEChA organizing groups, meetings, and workshops to inform and assist the undocumented population), as well as a student by providing academic assistance when Susana needed it, particularly with her media arts courses. This teacher always looked after students who did not have their families nearby, and ensured they had a place to live

and food to eat, particularly during school breaks. Invaded by conflicting emotions of the memories, with tears and occasional smiles, Susana recalled this experience:

I remember one time there were about six extra people in my house because during the Christmas break they kick you out of the dorms, and so there were people who could not afford housing for that time. So my roommates and I were taking in all our friends (giggles). . . . Then we didn't have enough food. And this professor, she brought us food, groceries. She said, "Here, for all of you guys." I didn't even know how to thank her—she brought food for all of us who were in the house.

This is only one account of many where this professor went out of her way to provide assistance to students. There were other faculty members that Susana remembers with great affection who always gave her words of encouragement; supported her academically; and believed in her as a student, as a person, and as an advocate for her community.

Similarly, Susana was also highly supported in the media arts department. Due to the small class size, particularly in upper-level classes, professors had a better opportunity to get to know their students on a more personal basis:

[It] was very helpful to have a small setting because the Spanish professors really got to know me, who I was, where I came from, so at a personal level. One of them became my mentor. So I liked the support in the classroom, but also in our personal lives.

Susana deems the support as an individual equally essential and valuable as the support as a student.

Strong, lasting friendships. Susana's pleasant and friendly personality allowed her to immediately develop strong friendships with many of her peers. She made friends in her different classes and departments, as well as with many students who knew her from MEChA. She became extremely close to the other organizers in the club. They gathered to do big cookouts and to socialize essentially every weekend. Many of these relationships have continued and remained strong even after Susana graduated.

Student services. The student services provided at Susana's campus varied in efficiency and usefulness from Susana's perspective. For instance, the Escudos Center, which houses the math and science tutors, computers and printers, and faculty offices is one of the most popular and helpful to students seeking academic help from professors or tutors. The center is funded by private grants, which allows undocumented students to become tutors or mentors and receive a stipend for their services. Other student services, such as the writing center, are funded through the university, so these services are actively promoted by the faculty. For instance, the English department requires students to use the writing center at least once, and students receive extra credit in their English courses for consecutive uses of the center's services. Although the services of the writing center are high quality, Susana utilized and benefited the most from the Escudos Center.

Insights for colleges regarding undocumented students. Like other colleges, Susana's school worked to lower its student drop-out rate. Susana recalls students dropping out for a variety of reasons—with undocumented students mainly dropping out

due to financial hardship, in her perception. Despite the low cost of her university, some students still cannot afford to attend. In Susana's case, aside from constant financial issues, a challenge in her perseverance was the location of the university. Its small town environment and lack of entertainment venues (e.g., movie theaters, clubs) make it rather unappealing from a college student's perspective. Despite the school's efforts to create activities and events, it is difficult to retain some of the students because of this reason. On the other hand, the school is successful in retaining immigrant and undocumented students because of the support they provide that goes beyond the recruiting and admission phases.

In Susana's view, her university has truly formed a system that is welcoming and incredibly supportive to the undocumented student community. This is reflected in the work of the recruiting office, and the positive change within faculty and school practices that was generated through the work of MEChA. The university has always been active in recruiting students through promoting its affordable tuition rates, making it very appealing to students with financial limitations, which often includes the undocumented population. The university recruits and embraces these students because there are supports in place for them to be successful and to persevere in their college endeavors. The university continues its work to develop an awareness of undocumented needs with its faculty and support services staff.

In Susana's standpoint, with the constant change in immigration policies, such as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), colleges must be up to date about how these changes affect undocumented students. Moreover, she believes it is necessary to

consistently review practices and resources to meet the needs of this population in view of the rapidly changing policies.

Just in 2010 we didn't pass the DREAM Act; then two years later we got the deferred action. So not only for colleges to know what that means, but for them to be really educated to be able to provide support. I am not talking about just the professors but directors of colleges. The more they educate themselves and embrace [this population], the better, so they don't discourage students from attending college. . . . Also because we do not qualify for any work-study, even with DACA, schools can do something similar to what [Susana's university] does, which is offer department stipends, from private grants, for students who tutor or work in different student centers.

Susana asserts that merely being informed can make a significant difference in alleviating some of the hardships undocumented students face, particularly financial ones. Susana considers money should not prevent any student from acquiring an education. If there is no federal aid, other means must be available to assist these students who otherwise have the same potential, talent, and intellect as any other successful college graduate.

Immediate future. Susana graduated May 2014 with a bachelor's degree in media arts and another degree in Spanish. She graduated with a 3.9 GPA. She is currently working for a non-profit organization outside of Colorado. Her organization provides her opportunities to continue to fulfill her passion to help the immigrant and the undocumented populations. Susana continues to express her political views through creating evocative art which exposes issues that depict the strengths of the undocumented

and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer) populations and represents the various “faces” for these populations.

Susana plans to expand her art exhibitions to many other states in the United States, so that more people can see and appreciate her portrayal of the undocumented population. Through videos, photography, and documentaries, Susana strives to create an awareness of the power, potential, and strengths of United States immigrants. In the future, Susana would like to return to Mexico and use her skills, experience, and knowledge to “give back” to her country of origin.

A permanent resolution. Susana hopes her hard work will be fruitful, and in the near future there will be a true path to permanent legal status. As of now, she is grateful to have DACA as this has allowed her to work legally, obtain a driver’s license, and travel unrestrictedly throughout the United States. Although DACA protects her from any deportation action, her hope is for a permanent resolution to her undocumented status.

Melinda

Melinda was the last participant interviewed. We met in a small, private office to ensure the confidentiality that was required for our conversation. On the first interview day, Melinda was dressed casually in a bright pink, long-sleeve shirt, jeans, and boots. Her hair was neatly pulled back in a low pony tail and her make-up looked fresh and natural. From the moment I met Melinda outside of the interview office, I noticed that she conducted herself in an extremely polite, respectful, and friendly manner.

Before beginning the first set of interview questions, I asked Melinda what pseudonym she preferred for her portrait, and she immediately and firmly responded she wished to use her real name, her full name if possible. However, per IRB approved confidentiality guidelines this was not possible.

Throughout all three interviews, Melinda sat up straight in her chair with a friendly smile, listening attentively to all questions and answering them in an utmost thorough and professional manner. When I asked a question for which she had multiple reasons as responses, she fully explained each reason, and then concisely summarized the overall response. It was highly evident that Melinda takes pride in doing everything with a high degree of excellence.

At the end of the last interview, which took place during the same session as the second one, we walked together to the parking lot, and I wished her safe travels on her upcoming family trip.

A close family. Melinda was born in the capital city of a state located in the northwestern part of Mexico. Melinda is the oldest of three siblings; she has a sister and a brother. Melinda lived in her town of origin until the age of 6, and then the family moved to another state within Mexico where her sister was born. Melinda attended pre-school for one year while living in this new town, but within a year the family returned to their home state where Melinda attended kindergarten. By this time, Melinda's dad had obtained a visa to work in the United States. He connected with extended family members residing in Denver, and soon he acquired his first employment opportunity. He worked for approximately nine months at a time, and then he returned to his family in Mexico for three months. He remained on this schedule for a period of two years. The family decided they did not want to continue these nine-month separation periods since the family was very close. As a result, Melinda's father made the necessary arrangements to safely bring the family to Denver.

A car trip. Through a family member, Melinda's parents met a woman who "crossed people" over to the United States via the Juarez-El Paso international bridge. Although Melinda does not recall many details about her experience crossing over, this is what she does recollect from the journey:

They drove us to Juarez, one of my cousins, and we stayed at this lady's house. Then we put all our things, only a small bag per person was allowed, in her car, and we got in the car. My mom's sister and her daughter were with us as well. So it was the lady, my mom, my auntie, my sister and I, and my cousin. And we literally just crossed through the line. We told them we were coming back from a

party in [Juarez] Mexico and that we lived in [El Paso] Texas. Since the lady was the one driving, they [Border Patrol Agents] just asked her all the questions, and she had a U.S. license and everything. They just kind of looked in the car, and we were supposedly asleep. The lady told us to pretend to be asleep, but I kept asking, “Why? I’m not tired. Why can’t I look out the window”? My mom was like, “Melinda, just be quiet. Just close your eyes.” So I don’t really remember seeing much. We just crossed through—they didn’t do any inspections. We didn’t have to get out of the car or anything. It was a lot easier because it was prior to 9/11. It was July 2001. We barely made it. So it was super easy. It was expensive, though! But it was worth it because we didn’t have to go, you know, through the river, get out of the car and hike, or anything. We just went straight through. The lady said we were all U.S. citizens. My mom has green eyes and lighter hair, so she knew she could pass as American.

Because Melinda was so young, and she did not understand what was transpiring, she did not have any fear. As far as she knew, she was simply taking a family car trip with her mom and sister.

K-12 experiences.

A bright educational beginning. Melinda and her family made Denver their new home in the United States. Melinda was immediately enrolled in school to attend 1st grade. This was the beginning of a bright and academically successful educational journey. Melinda recalls 1st grade as the “toughest” grade level solely due to the language barrier. Since she did not have any previous experience in a formal elementary school setting, she did not

have any point of reference to serve as a comparison. Perhaps the transition was harder on Melinda's mom: ". . . I remember getting in line the first day, and my mom was there, and I saw her crying." Melinda's mom was leaving her little one in a new school in a different country, and her child did not even speak the language. However, it did not take long for this bright little girl to surpass her peers academically, including native English speakers:

It was really tough that first month, but then I remember learning English so quickly that in about three months they took me out of the ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and put me into the regular literacy classes. I think it was so fast that I don't even remember when it clicked—when I started speaking or actually understanding it. But by the time I finished 1st grade, I was in the advanced literacy classes, reading and writing. The language came to me really fast.

The rest of Melinda's elementary years only improved. In fact, by the time Melinda was in 5th grade, she was the editor for the school yearbook and president of the student council. She was also translating for students who had recently arrived from Mexico:

You know, I felt very special. I felt like a leader and like a big girl (proud giggle). I think that really helped a lot with my leadership skills, and just being able to socialize and help others. I wanted to help them out because I knew I was in their position once. In 1st grade, I was where they were sitting now.

These were the first signs of Melinda's penchant to lead and serve others.

College bound. In middle school, Melinda's academic success continued maintaining a 4.0 GPA. She received an award for Outstanding Student of the Year in 8th grade. Melinda was also involved in extracurricular activities, including volleyball in which she competed all three years at middle school. It was during middle school when Melinda had her first taste of the impact of being undocumented. Although she had always been aware she was not a United States citizen or a permanent resident, up until this point she had not yet encountered a situation in which her immigrant status affected her:

I do remember in middle school TRIO Upward Bound (an academic and college preparatory program funded by the United States Department of Education) starts to recruit students, and you know, they saw my portfolio, my good grades, my participation, and a good word from the teachers, so they were always trying to recruit me. But they'd ask me for those nine digits, and I always told them I didn't have that because I was not a U.S. citizen. And maybe that was the first time that I realized, "Wow, I'm not from here; I can't do that."

Even though Melinda had now realized there were certain programs and opportunities to which she did not have access due to her status, it really did not affect her immediate world. The true realization of the impact would come later in high school.

Valedictorian. In high school, Melinda continued to play volleyball every year. She was also the president of the National Student Honor Society for two years. Academically, she continued to excel, eventually graduating as valedictorian. Although Melinda had all the attributes sought out by colleges and scholarship recruiters, her

educational future was still uncertain: “I started to realize, ‘I am not from here. Aside from all my achievements, I may need to just find a job right after high school, and I will not be able to attend college.’” Nevertheless, Melinda soon learned she had been awarded her first scholarship:

Then my junior year I won my first scholarship for CU Boulder, and that’s when I realized there are options out there for me. There are private scholarships, there are donors, there is institutional aid, and that kind of kept me motivated to test the waters.

Melinda ultimately received two scholarships from this institution: one through the nomination of her high school counselor, and the other one for participating in a weeklong business leadership workshop. Although Melinda did not eventually attend this university, receiving the awards was extremely exciting for her and her parents, and most importantly it gave her a refreshed sense of confidence and hope.

Going to college was always a goal for Melinda since her elementary years when she dreamt of becoming a teacher, and her parents fully supported this goal. Melinda’s father had attended a year of college in Mexico, and her mother had completed middle school, which she did after she was already an adult. Therefore, Melinda’s parents’ were adamant that their daughter was able to take advantage of all of the opportunities presented to her that would help her achieve her goals.

Melinda’s determination to get an education was greatly influenced by her parents:

Knowing that my parents sacrificed so much to move from one country to another—that's such a great sacrifice, and I didn't want to waste that by getting bad grades and not doing well in school. You know, it's hard to repay your parents for that. . .

A taste of the college experience. All throughout high school, Melinda participated in advanced courses. Since her high school did not have AP (advanced placement) courses, her counselor recommended her to participate in concurrent enrollment, a program in which academically advanced students take college courses for both high school and college credit. Melinda took full advantage of this opportunity and spent most of her junior and senior school days at the local community college taking English, math, and science courses.

Melinda deems the concurrent enrollment opportunity served as a college preparation program that taught her the logistics of college such as registering for classes, buying books—and realizing “how expensive they are”—she chuckled. The experience prepared Melinda well for her first year in college. Melinda applied to three well-known Colorado universities, and she was accepted to all of them. She was excited not only to receive her letters of acceptance but also to know she even had the privilege to choose where to attend.

College Experiences.

Leaving home. Although Melinda's desire to become a teacher changed, acquiring a bachelor's degree always continued to be her goal. Due to financial hardship, Melinda thought that while she would not be able to attend college right after high

school, she would eventually attend sometime in the future. Fortunately, Melinda was able to obtain enough scholarships and institutional aid to enroll in college upon graduating from high school. She chose to attend a public university located outside of the Denver metro area that offered her institutional aid and work study while she pursued a career in veterinary medicine. She had selected this career during her junior year in high school after volunteering as a technician at a veterinary clinic. This university offered her institutional aid based on her financial need, diverse ethnicity, and outstanding academic profile. The school also worked around her undocumented status and offered her work study; with all this aid and a few small scholarships Melinda had been awarded, she was able to cover one or two semesters.

In the beginning, Melinda was excited to “go away” to college and move to the dormitory. She soon realized it was much more difficult than she had expected:

I’m going to live in the dorms, and I’m not going to have any rules, and I can go out whenever I want and stuff. But once I got there and I realized, “Wow, my family is not here, and I’m living with this stranger,” my roommate who was a stranger at first. . . . I started to realize how much I value family, and being close to people that I know—also, being around people who are like me. I was the only Hispanic girl in that hallway, so I never got to speak Spanish with them or listen to the music I like. So that transition was a lot harder than I thought. And I think it went both ways—it was tough for my family as well. I noticed when I would come visit that my mom was a bit depressed. It wasn’t the same without Melinda (chuckles). . . . I missed my family a lot. My mom always told me, “Do what you

think is best.” My parents never told me, “You need to come back.” They always said, “Whatever you think is the best, whatever you think is going to work out, you know we will be here no matter what.”

Furthermore, Melinda did not know if she would be able to continue to afford college without the institution’s financial aid. If she had to move out of the dormitory, she knew she could not get housing without a social security number, line of credit, or an income. In addition to this, she had resolved to leave veterinary medicine and pursue a degree in human services. Melinda only attended this university for one semester. She decided to move back to Denver and attend a local, public university that will be referred to as “Urban University.”

A fresh start. The experience of attending college away from home, the veterinary program, the student dormitory, are all experiences Melinda values. However, she perceived Urban University as a fresh start. This school met all of her needs and expectations, and it allowed her to be back home:

I decided on [Urban] because it was closer to home so I wouldn’t have to pay for dorms and meals. It is a lot more diverse than where I had started. I really liked their human services major. I looked into that, and I felt that fit my personality and my future goals a lot better, and [my previous school] didn’t have that. So I think my career goals, my family, and also the connections that I already have here made me feel it was appropriate to make that change. . . . I felt that [Urban] was a lot friendlier towards the undocumented students, Hispanic students,

immigrant students, in general. I felt I would get more support and resources here, and lastly it was definitely a lot more affordable.

Melinda continues to apply for and receive a number of scholarships. Urban University has also offered financial aid to subsidize the cost of her schooling.

College transfer. When Melinda transferred to Urban University, the process was smooth and seamless. She found the system to be student friendly for transfer students. For instance, Melinda's financial aid counselor was available to guide her throughout the transfer process and answer all her questions. Because Melinda already had some college experience, she was better equipped to ask the right questions. The financial counselor was prompt in addressing all of Melinda's inquiries. However, as an undocumented student, Melinda considers she was not afforded easy access to all the essential information:

I could call her or email her, and that was good, but they didn't really explain the options I had as an undocumented student regarding financial aid. I kind of had to say, "Whoa, can I get this kind of money, or these types of grants or scholarships"? So maybe in that sense it was not very informative.

At the time Melinda started at Urban, the Colorado ASSET (Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow) bill had just been approved. Therefore, the financial aid office was still trying to hash out the details of how this new program could lessen the financial burden on undocumented college students.

Programs and supports for immigrant and undocumented students.

Immigrant services program. According to Melinda, Urban University has been a pioneer in implementing tuition aid and establishing support services and programs for immigrant and undocumented students. Melinda has particularly benefited from Urban's Immigrant Services Program. This program actually reached out to Melinda, welcomed her to Urban and proactively offered their services. Based on information on Melinda's application, the director contacted Melinda directly, asked her how things were going, and provided all the information Melinda needed in order to take advantage of the supports, particularly financial assistance, that are available to her as an immigrant student.

Through the director of the Immigrant Services Program, Melinda learned it was in her best interest to submit a FAFSA application because even if she did not qualify for federal assistance, the information provided helped Urban assess her individual financial needs and offer other assistance. Immigrant Services also informed Melinda about a scholarship that she decided to apply for and now receives. In addition, Melinda learned about COF (Colorado Opportunity Fund). Through COF, Melinda receives over \$60 per credit hour off the cost of her tuition. Melinda is a full-time student; thus, she receives approximately \$1,300 a semester that is applied towards her tuition bill. In addition to finances, the program also offers academic supports to its students, and more importantly helps them build their self-esteem, "letting them know they're not the only ones out there." The peer relationships Melinda has built are mostly with other students who

participate in this program: “We bond and we exchange information, and we help each other: ‘you know we can do this,’ and ‘we can do this together.’ We help each other.”

Melinda was so pleased with the work of the Immigrant Services Program that when the director made her an unexpected offer, she could not resist:

So she [the director] is the one who taught me about COF, and she is the one who helped me with all the financial things, all the information about financial resources for undocumented students. So then of course when she asked me if I wanted to work for them—I said yes (chuckles)!

Melinda sees this program as the most valuable aspect of Urban University: “If they had not reached out to me, I don’t know what I’d be doing right now.” It has been the vehicle to meet other undocumented students like herself—connecting with students in her situation, which was one of the factors in Melinda’s decision to transfer to Urban.

RISE. Through the Immigrant Services Program, Melinda learned about RISE, a new club within Urban that is dedicated to empowering and helping undocumented students. RISE started this semester (Fall 2014), and Melinda has attended a couple of the meetings and some of the events the club has hosted. For instance, when RISE invited the Colorado democrat candidate for the senate in the recent election to speak at Urban, Melinda was in attendance. Although Melinda does not have much time to participate in extracurricular activities, she plans to join RISE next semester.

Spanish club. Also new at Urban is the Spanish Club. The club is just getting off the ground, and it has already hosted a few events at the school. For instance, it hosted the author of a book used in the Spanish department to come and speak to students at

Urban. Melinda attended this event, and she is highly interested in getting more involved with the club and utilize her leadership skills to build the structure the club needs to become a strong organization at Urban.

Relationships and Interactions.

Cordial faculty interactions. While Melinda describes her relationships and interactions with her professors as cordial and “like any other student’s,” she recognizes that she is the one who initiates contact. She emails her professors before the beginning of classes to introduce herself and ask for the syllabus ahead of time. Professors respond very positively to her proactive nature, and she believes this establishes a positive teacher-student relationship at the onset. Melinda has also been very open about her undocumented status in her classes. She uses her classroom assignments, particularly writing assignments, as a vehicle to voice who she is:

I’m pretty open about my situation, and I like to write about the truth, and that’s kind of what I write. I have had professors email me back and say, “Wow, thank you for telling me this” or “Thank you for being so honest and open in your writing.”

Melinda’s openness allows for professors to get to know her on a more personal level and have more meaningful interactions in the classroom.

Outside of the classroom, Melinda’s interactions with her professors are limited, but still cordial. If Melinda needs help (although she has not needed any so far), she knows the professors are available to offer assistance during and outside of classroom time.

Melinda believes her professors value her academic accomplishments, and they admire her tenacity despite the obstacles she has faced as an undocumented student. They also appreciate how Melinda embraces her situation and uses it to motivate herself:

I feel that when I tell them about myself, that I am undocumented, the ones that I have told when they know are surprised. They are like, “Whoa, you’re here in college and you’re doing so well. You’re eager to get your education. Good job.” And the ones who don’t know, they just see me as a good student.

Positive student interactions. As part of the class structure, professors at Urban include opportunities for students to do group work and projects. Although Melinda finds this part of the college experience as positive, she prefers individual work since she takes pride in the quality of her work, and she takes her grades very seriously.

So my experiences have always been positive with other students. The assignments that we have are almost all on your own, but we’ve had group projects. I’m not very fond of those because I like to do my own work, and I like how I do things, and sometimes the effort of other students is not to my standards, and I have to kind of pick up the slack. So I prefer doing assignments on my own, or maybe even being graded individually. I dislike how sometimes your grade is based off of other people who maybe don’t care as much as you do or don’t put the same kind of effort.

While the process of assigning grades for group-work is not perfect, Melinda does enjoy interacting with the diverse population of students in her classes. For instance, there are

classes where some of her peers are at least 50 years old, and there are students from different ethnic backgrounds as well.

Melinda's interaction with other students has been limited due to her busy schedule; however, she has developed some relationships with students on the campus. Specifically, she has created most of her friendships with peers who are part of the Immigrant Services Program.

Student and family support. Overall, succeeding in college has given Melinda more confidence, helped her mature, and boosted her self-esteem. She has also had the opportunity to meet people from all around the world, broadening her experiences and her outlook on life: "I'm more open-minded now, I feel like I am more aware of things, people, and situations." Melinda's parents have had a steep learning curve with her college experience. They consider they have also grown from the college experience via Melinda, and are now better prepared for their two younger children.

Orientation—in their native language. Melinda's parents did not understand the college system in the United States, and this made the situation more difficult for Melinda from the moment she started the college preparation process (e.g., applying for college admission). Although Urban's orientation for transfer students was not helpful at all for Melinda, mainly because she already had college experience at two post-secondary institutions, the orientation her parents received had a strong, positive impact. Urban University offers a parent orientation that is conducted completely in Spanish. Melinda and her parents deem this orientation as extremely beneficial. Melinda's parents received valuable information on college basics (e.g., credit hours) and financial aid, as well as

some parental tools to equip them to better support Melinda in succeeding in her college journey.

I think that orientation really helped them out—they went through FAFSA and all financial aid in detail, kind of telling them how things work. I know my mom, before, she wouldn't really discipline my siblings when it came to me being in my room trying to study or do homework. They would be kind of loud, listening to music and stuff like that. And after that orientation, she makes sure that I have my 2 to 3 hours in the evening of peace and quiet, and that I don't get interrupted.

The orientation experience helped Melinda's parents to be even more supportive than they already were. Melinda believes her parents have had quite a positive influence on her college education.

Family—love and support. From the moment Melinda began her education in the 1st grade, her parents have been her most valuable pillars of support. Although they might wonder if they have provided enough assistance or if they have always done “the right thing,” their support in many aspects has been instrumental to Melinda's academic persistence and success.

My parents have influenced me to keep working hard, to focus on school first and then my job and other things. They always tell me, “Don't worry about money to pay bills; focus on your school, and we will handle the rest.” And I feel like they say that because they can't really help me in other ways. They can't really edit my essays or help me out with a project, so they kind of fill that gap with love and

support, and telling me, “You are living here with us, you don’t have to pay rent, you don’t have to pay for food or anything else like that; just focus on school.”

Melinda knows her parents see the drive and passion in her that is required to persevere in pursue her goals. They are there to support her despite having to “let go” of their little girl, like when she decided to leave home to go to college. “They were not going to tear that down just because of their own ‘greediness’ (chuckles) to keep me at home.” When Melinda made the decision to come back home, they were there to give her the “love and support she needed” to do whatever she thought was best for her and made her happy.

Role models. In addition to her parents, Melinda views her high school teachers as significant motivators and role models. They encouraged her to continue her education, even though they knew about her undocumented status. They saw past that and focused on her high academic potential. Melinda has always admired the work of teachers, and the motivation they provide to “help others move forward and succeed not just in school but in life.” As a result, she strives to serve as a motivating role model for those with similar backgrounds and facing similar challenges.

At different stages of our lives. Although Melinda’s educational and career goals have never affected her relationship with her family, this has not been the case with her friends, particularly with old high school friends. According to Melinda, more than half of her friends did not continue their education, and that has driven her apart from them to some degree:

[It’s] difficult to stay in touch, one because I feel I am always busy, and two because we don’t have the commonality anymore. . . . Now all I want to talk

about is my credits and my classes and things that are happening on campus. It has kind of deteriorated those relationships because we don't really have things in common anymore. Some of my friends are already starting their families.

Although there is still some communication through social media, the friendships are certainly fractured. Melinda believes she is simply at a different stage of her life than her friends. She is very satisfied with the direction her life is going, and she presumes her friends are content with the directions they have chosen to take.

Drive, commitment, and support. Financial struggles can undeniably hinder any student's success. An undocumented status can certainly exacerbate this hindrance, deterring students from persisting in the pursuit of a college degree. Melinda asserts that a strong drive, a firm commitment, and a solid support system can provide the necessary supports for those who strive to succeed: "I think it's that drive to do better for myself, and for my parents as well, and my family. Getting past those barriers that have been put in front of me. Letting people know that I can do this."

While Melinda has had to work through some hardships in order to continue her education, she has also used these obstacles to motivate her to persist with even more force.

The biggest hardship has just been getting denied scholarships that I am more than well qualified for. I know at [previous university] I qualified for what is called the Dean's scholarship, which was \$4,000 per semester. I have the GPA, I have all the grades and the community service, but when you see that little requirement at the end about U.S. citizenship, that's the hardest thing for me. . . .

‘Why do I have to be in this circumstance?’ But then, I think about how far I’ve gone and how my status has given me the opportunity to advocate for myself, work a little bit harder than others, and then it just kind of goes away—by now I’m used to it. I know that there are other options for me. If they reject me and say they’re sorry they can’t do something for me, I just say, “Okay, thank you” . . . because I know there is something out there for me.

For Melinda, her perspective on her undocumented status has transformed from being a barrier to the motor that propels her forward.

Future plans and aspirations. Melinda is majoring in human services with a concentration in mental health counseling. She is also seeking to be certified as an English/Spanish translator. Her human services program will allow her to do an internship; she is excited to know she will have real-world experience before she completes her degree. Although some people expected Melinda would receive less of a rigorous educational experience at Urban University, she strongly believes her university provides the best program in her field, and it is an institution that has “welcomed her with open arms” as Urban University has long been established in providing resources to support undocumented students.

Serving students and families. After graduation, Melinda hopes to be able to get employed immediately, preferably with one of the agencies where she will do her senior internship. It is her desire to stay in her community and serve families and students like herself. She considers her personal experience and the knowledge she is acquiring at Urban University assets that can be utilized for the benefit of other immigrant

individuals. In five to ten years after graduation, Melinda would like to return to school for a master's degree in multicultural counseling.

Permanent legal status. In regards to legal status, Melinda hopes for a more permanent immigration reform. She currently has DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and although that has ameliorated the effects of an undocumented status as a college student, she wants to be certain she can continue to work legally and use her degree to help others.

Section Two: Emergent Themes

The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validation experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. To explore the in- and out-of-class validating experiences of undocumented students who were successful in pursuing a bachelors' degree, the portraits of Emiliano, Sofía, Raúl, Susana and Melinda were constructed. The portraits revealed rich journeys that were unique; however, the coding process that employed initial and in vivo coding for the first cycle and focused coding for the second cycle, uncovered 47 initial emergent categories. Appendix F is an illustration of these initial emergent categories and their frequencies.

These categories were distilled until the five overarching themes clearly emerged. The identified themes are presented in the table below.

Table 3. Themes

Themes
1. High School: Gateway to Awareness
2. Undocumented Status Barriers
3. Deflected Futures
4. Two-Way Validation
5. Social Reform

The remainder of this chapter presents the five themes in detail, and reveals how they emerged from the data. Although the themes may appear simple on the surface, the depth of each theme encompasses the compilation of rich and complex personal experiences of five individuals. The emotion, passion and intimate details that the participants were willing to divulge provided further validation to the overall impact that these themes had on their college persistence and their future aspirations.

Theme 1. High School: A Gateway to Awareness

The first overarching theme in the research is high school as the gateway to undocumented status awareness. This theme emerged as the data showed all of the students became fully aware of their status and its impacts sometime during their high school years. For Sofía, Raúl and Melinda, not only did their awareness surface during high school, but more specifically in their junior year when they began the college access process. All five students had some degree of awareness regarding their legal status before high school; however, they had not come to the full realization of the impacts of an undocumented status. In regards to this Melinda shared:

I do remember in middle school, this college preparatory program starts to recruit students, and you know, they'd see my portfolio, my good grades, my participation, and a good word from the teachers, so they were always trying to recruit me. But they'd ask me for those nine digits, and I always told them I didn't have that because I was not a U.S. citizen. And maybe that was the first time that I could realize, "Wow, I'm not from here, I can't do that." But it really didn't affect me as much.

Similarly, Emiliano, Sofía, Raúl and Susana had “glimpses” of awareness of their undocumented status; however, the turning was during high school.

As soon as the participants became aware of their status as a hindrance for their future plans, each of them began to take steps to overcome the obstacles their status posed.

Sofía: I joined this organization [pro and for immigrants] out of my high school, plus I also started getting educated about my own issue. And then I realized that I wasn't the only one [undocumented student]. There were many of us, especially at my high school.

Some of them began with small, personal steps to begin changing their foreseeable path to one of college attainment:

Raúl: I was sad. “I’m not going to go to the school where I want to go. I’m not going to do what I wanted to do.” I was kind of depressed for a while. But I kept on going to see her [school counselor] and she kept telling me I should apply for this and that.

Melinda: So high school again, I did volleyball four years. I was the President of the National Student Honor Society for two years.

Moreover, Melinda addressed the challenge from an academic perspective. She took concurrent enrollment (high school and college credit) classes her last two years of high school, and she graduated as valedictorian in order to increase her prospects of accessing and succeeding in college.

Theme 2. Undocumented Status Barriers

The theme of status barriers encompassed the experiences, feelings and perceptions of the participants regarding their membership in the United States. This theme emerged from initial categories with an abundance of codes regarding barriers. These initial categories included: overcoming obstacles, adverse perceptions/emotions, undocumented status general barriers, undocumented status college barriers and undocumented status employment barriers. Correspondingly, the portraits revealed the participants represent the face of the undocumented population encountering the same status barriers that the rest of the this population such as, traveling restrictions, ineligibility to obtain a driver license, limited employment options, and limited access to financial support for college (i.e., financial aid and scholarships).

Travel outside of the country is not a viable option without legal status. As such, any person without documentation is basically confined to the United States territory if they wish to continue to live in the country. Yet, these young individuals expressed a strong desire to travel to study abroad or visit other places around the world:

Raúl: What I really want to do is travel. . . . If I'm legalized it would be easier for me to travel—I can come back and see my family.

Melinda: One of the things that I know kind of affects me now is studying abroad.

That's something that I definitely wish I could do, and everybody tells me to do it.

Another barrier the participants encountered was their ineligibility to legally drive. Although, the Colorado Road and Community Safety Act, SB-251, effective August 2014, now allows issuance of licenses to Colorado residents who cannot

demonstrate legal status (Nicholson, 2014), this was not in effect when the participants of this study began driving.

Sofía: I really didn't care for driving, but that's also when I realized, "Oh, okay. I can't get a driver's license." I started driving my senior year- just a little bit through my neighborhood, to school, which is not a lot- but even just driving was fearful.

Melinda: I'm just going to have to drive without a driver's license, and get to school and back.

All participants expressed facing difficulties regarding employment. Their status limited employment options regardless of skill or education level.

Emiliano: I twist ice cream—that's not a real job.

Raúl: Finding a job has been hard because, you know, I'm undocumented.

Melinda: ... I'll just have to get a job where they will have to pay me cash, or where they're going to allow me to work even though I cannot work legally.

College financial barriers are exacerbated for undocumented students because they do not qualify to receive federal student aid, and the scholarships available to them are limited. Some of the participants expressed frustration because in spite of meeting all criteria such as GPA, community service, and teacher recommendations, they did not qualify for many scholarships without legal status:

Susana: I actually got the Daniels fund scholarship. . . Yeah (sighs), then they took it away because I was undocumented.

In other instances, the scholarships available to undocumented students were of a much lower amount than those available to other students:

Sofía: My senior year I also applied to like 30 scholarships and out of all those 30 scholarships, I only got one (laughs). So that was horrible! And that scholarship I was actually not even, I was not even qualified to apply for it because I had to be a citizen or have my social security number.

Raúl: Basically she [the school counselor] said, “You have to have a GPA above this,” so I thought, “okay I have that.” She went down the list and I pretty much had everything. Then she said, “If you don’t have a Social Security number you don’t qualify for this.” . . . She said, “even if you are undocumented you do qualify for certain scholarships,” but the scholarships I qualified for were like \$200 scholarships. And this guy that I knew since middle school... they had lower GPAs than me and they qualified for scholarships that gave them a lot more money. I thought, “That’s not fair”!

Another encountered barrier is that undocumented students do not qualify to receive federal student aid, often referred to simply as financial aid:

Sofía: I don’t qualify for any of [the] financial aid.

Susana: I didn’t qualify for financial aid. . . . A lot of the undocumented students because of financial aid, of course, because even with the low-cost not everybody can afford that [tuition]. So unfortunately many of my friends ended up not being able to pay.

Melinda: I'm not going to be able to pay for it [college] because I'm not going to be able to get financial aid. . .

The last barrier related to college is school of choice. Although generally colleges do not deny admission to undocumented students, in many instances this is at the high cost of out-of-state tuition. At the time four out of the five participants enrolled in college, financial relieve such as the Colorado ASSET, which allows undocumented students to pay in-state-tuition, was not in effect. All five participants selected their college institutions based on cost and/or financial assistance the institution was willing to provide:

Emiliano: . . . one of my friends was taking classes at the [alternative] campus. That campus was cheaper. It was like \$300 or \$400 per credit, so I went there before transferring to [current university].

Sofía: I wanted to go to [local university], actually, because of what I wanted to study, but the cost, it was way too expensive There are so many undocumented students that go to [out-of-state university] because of the low cost.

Raúl: Well, I decided to go there [current university] because it was one of the cheapest schools in the United States.

Susana: That's when I really realized that I couldn't stay in Colorado even though I had tried my best to do whatever was possible for me to go to [a Colorado

university], which was my dream school [Current university] was my last option but I ended up going there because of money.

Melinda: I got accepted into the pre-vet program with them [previous university], and when I talked to one of their financial counselors, he told me they would be willing to work around my immigration status and help me out even though I wasn't a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. So I decided to go there.

Without federal financial aid or enough scholarship funds, all participants had to relinquish their first school of choice. In fact, with the exception to Melinda, all participants attended the school with the lowest cost, at least at the beginning of their college career.

Theme 3. Deflected Futures

As participants were asked to share about their future plans and aspirations, a clear theme emerged. All students had two different scenarios: the feasible plans given their undocumented status, and the plans if this obstacle did not exist. Their status seems to deflect their futures for the short, and perhaps long-term.

Each of these five persistent young adults have conquered their academic goals as successful college graduates or soon to be graduates. They are part of that small number of the undocumented population who succeed in obtaining a bachelor's degree. Despite this exceptional attainment, their future plans, goals and aspirations are undeniably affected by legal status. In each instance, these promising individuals' plans are directly contingent upon a positive change in their legal situation. This is especially true for Sofía and Raúl who have an interest in seeking employment outside of the US:

Sofía: [My] ultimate goal is to be a social worker in Saudi Arabia, and as of right now, if I don't have a job opportunity in Saudi Arabia, I cannot travel. . . . That's my ultimate goal but right now because of my legal status I have to stay in the country.

Raúl: For example, if I were to work somewhere else, like in a different country, then I would have to leave the [US] and I would not know when I would be able to come back and see my family.

In Susana's instance, she would like to eventually return to Mexico where she wishes to continue her work in the non-profit world around social justice issues. Similarly to Raúl, if she leaves before obtaining legal status, it is unlikely she will be able to return to the United States where all her immediate family resides.

Although Melinda's plans are to stay in Denver, her current deferred status through DACA adds uncertainty as to whether she will be able to work lawfully in the United States if she does not obtain a permanent legal status: "So I'm hoping for something longer than a two-year work authorization. Something that is going to ensure I can legally work here, and be able to use my degree to help out others." By the time Melinda graduates, her two-year work permit will be due for renewal.

Despite all the hardships, these undocumented students are certain they will achieve their academic goals. Emiliano and Susana have already obtained their bachelor's degree, and the other three participants will obtain it in six to 24 months.

Concerning their legal status, feelings of uncertainty and reservation emerge:

Emiliano: I really want to have a more meaningful life, and I feel right now it's not meaningful and it's all as a result of the Social Security number that I don't have. . . . And eventually, I don't want to be in the deferred status because that is not legal status.

Sofía: Right now, if immigration reform passes, I know I will qualify for it, so I really hope immigration passes from this year to like in five years. If not, I think I will lose hope (laughs). Because we have tried for so long and, I don't know, a lot of people do get married to get papers and all that, but I really don't want to get married just for me to get papers (giggles). But, I hope I get my citizenship. My parents, obviously they don't have any documents either, so I think they're stuck here in the United States for a while.

Raúl: [In five years], I would say I would have fixed my immigration status. What I really want to do is travel. So I say five years from now even if I'm still undocumented, I would just leave so I can travel around the world.

Melinda: If my work authorization is taken away, since it's under DACA, so it's an executive order. . . We don't know who is going to come after Obama, and if he or she will take that away.

The hope of all five young adults is that they will be granted legal status allowing them the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations to their greatest potential.

Theme 4. Two-Way Validation

Two-way validation involves academic and interpersonal validation that occurs both in and out of class. The experiences of the five students in the study reveal two-way validation taking place. As the students described these experiences, it became apparent all five had this in common; all of them experienced and required validation in and outside of the campus in order to persist in college. The participants' excerpts in this section support how their persistence may be impacted without in or out-of-class validation.

In-class validation. There are some specific actions that occurred in-class that promoted confidence in the study's five nontraditional students who are Hispanic, undocumented, and four out of the five students first-generation college students. In-class validation can be academic or interpersonal in nature. Direct quotations from the participants are used to illustrate the vast number of in-class validating experiences they encountered.

In-class academic validation. The participants experienced consistent academic validation, specifically from professors, and it occurred in many areas such as academic tutoring, curriculum, and classroom structures. Two of the participants shared academic validation experiences from professors who were willing to take the time to help students in need of further academic support:

Emiliano: So the teachers are really friendly, they're willing to help you out. You really need to want to fail to fail, because they give you the tools—they're really there to help you if you want.

Raúl: So all the professors, for the classes I've taken, they have an open-door policy, pretty much. You can just talk to the professors and look for their help.

With respect to faculty fostering academic validation through the curriculum they teach and the structure of the learning experiences, four of the participants shared instances in which they had the opportunity to learn relevant, applicable, and challenging material to further their academic development:

Emiliano: The first day of class she [the professor] said, "I have a syllabus, but I also have our own syllabus, so we're going to come up with projects that you guys are interested in." So if I wanted to study something within the Hispanic market, she was willing to go that direction because I wanted to study that.

Raúl: Like the English professor I was telling you about, he was so hard on everybody. He would grade everybody's papers so hard. And he would tell us, "I don't want you guys just to take your university work for granted. I'm making your degree worth what you're working for." And that helped me out a lot because now I'm writing a lot of papers. I don't see a lot of grammar errors or spelling errors.

Susana: So the Spanish department's pretty weak, but the media arts, on the other hand, their curriculum was pretty strong . . . the department is smaller than other departments, less students there. So the professors have an opportunity to really focus on those students and push them to go out there. For example, we have a job coordinator so every single media arts student graduated with a job. They were

really strong with focusing on the future of the students. You get hands-on experience, so it is definitely a stronger department.

Melinda: I like my curriculum within my major because we are required to do two internships, and I feel like that is going to give me more experience and get me out there to be able to network. So once I graduate I will be able to work in one of the internships I have been doing. . . . I'm going to be out there in the work force before I graduate.

In-class interpersonal validation. In addition to academic validation, this group of college students experienced ample interpersonal validation. As a result, they felt extremely valued as individuals in their classrooms. What others or even themselves perceived as a disadvantage (i.e., ethnic background), was considered an asset by their professors.

The following quotes exemplify how the participants experienced interpersonal validation. Emiliano shared two different ways in which his professors provided him positive feedback, and recognized his personal qualities boosting his self-esteem:

Emiliano: All of them [his professors] like me. I think just from the feedback, because in every reflection we get feedback—they work a lot on bringing you up and bring your self-esteem up, and tell you all the good things that you have and the ones that aren't so good, they make those sound like those are opportunities.

Emiliano: This last semester, I was talking to a professor and he told me, "I see the entrepreneur in you, I know you're going to do great things, and I know

you're going to start your own businesses, and I know you are going to help others.”

Emiliano, Sofía, Melinda, and Susana recounted experiences that made them feel validated because their culture, and the strengths they brought to the table were valued. Also, the faculty empathized with the needs and struggles of the undocumented student population, thus they reached out to help them obtain the supports necessary:

Emiliano: [University] definitely made me a better person, and wiser. I think they knew there wasn't a lot of diversity in that school, so therefore they saw me as somebody who could bring something into a project.

Sofía: [The] club that I am mostly involved with is MECHA, which stands for *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos/Chicanas de Aztlan* (Student Movement of Chicano/as of Aztlan). [We] focus on just student issues, most of them are Chicano issues but it's not just for Chicanos, it's for all students. . . . But I know that now a lot of the faculty from our university, like if you're undocumented, then they're like, “oh you are undocumented? Go to MEChA (laughs). They know we'll give them support there.

Melinda: I knew a lot of people here who could help me out, and I felt that [her university] was a lot friendlier towards the undocumented students, Hispanic students, and immigrant students in general. I felt like I would get more support and resources here. . .

Susana: Well, you always have some professors who are not very supportive but you deal with it. With the rest of the professors, because it was such a small university and the population of undocumented students was pretty big, it was an important issue. A lot of professors have to work with a lot of them [undocumented students] so they were very supportive, very concerned, and very involved. They were actually very supportive of all the decisions we made for us the dreamers.

Melinda: Their openness to accept me as who I am, and how they are immigrant friendly. [Her university] has been the first to do a lot of things for us [the undocumented student population], so they have welcomed me with open arms.

Susana: I had great professors; these professors knew my struggles. I was the only undocumented student and the only *Mexicana* in the media arts department.

Sofía and Susana shared accounts about professors who went “beyond the call of duty” to ensure their physical and emotional well-being in an authentic and caring manner:

Susana: I remember going to her [professor’s] office many times just crying maybe because it was finals week, because I was stressed out, or my life was crazy, or just because I was young and stupid (chuckles), or even crying because of my Spanish classes—I had poetry that I did not understand. I would sit there with her for hours and tell her, “I just don’t get it”! She would just listen to me; she was the only one who had patience. She was also another individual who pushed me in my professional career. I’m very lucky.

Susana: Being in higher Spanish, such as advanced grammar and all those classes, it was very helpful to have a small setting because the Spanish professors really got to know me—who I was, where I came from, at a personal level. One of them became my mentor. So I liked the support in the classroom, but also in our personal lives.

Susana: You know, I am very lucky because I was part of this club, MEChA—everybody knew me. My advisor from MEChA, man, he became like a dad to us. He was also my mentor so whatever I needed he's the one I went to. If it was to talk about my organizing skills, or if I needed to do a resume, or if I just needed to talk—I was very lucky to have him. That's important.

Susana: And this professor, she brought us food, groceries. She said, "Here, for all of you guys." I didn't even know how to thank her—she brought food for all of us who were in the house.

Sofía: [A professor] has been like a father. He has really taken care, personally, of me. I feel he's really close to me. He's a professor that would tell me, if there's something broken in my house, he would go and fix it. He would invite me for the holidays with him and his wife because he knew I was working so I couldn't go home, and I wasn't the only one, there were other students that would stay for the holidays and he would always invite us all to his house.

In-class interpersonal validation did not stem from faculty exclusively, but from peers as well. With regards to this, Melinda, Raúl and Sofía shared:

Melinda: Being part of the program [Immigrant Services Program], you get to meet other students like yourself [immigrant/undocumented]. So you get the academic and financial support and resources, but you also get to make connections with other students like yourself. We bond, and we exchange information, and we help each other, “you know we can do this,” and “we can do this together.” We help each other.

Raúl: . . . But when I lived in the dorms, I talked to people who lived in my hall. So we really got to know each other, especially because the [dormitory] had events every now and then. Like one time we played *lotería* (Mexican bingo). A lot of them didn’t know what it was, and we had to explain it to them.

Sofía: I think a lot of my friends, because of the same thing that there are so many undocumented students that go to [her university] because of the low cost, we are like, “oh let’s try to do something,” you know, so even within each other we would try to get motivated, like, “oh let’s not sleep tonight because we are studying for midterms.”

Melinda’s validation as a student and as an individual derives mainly from a student program within her university. The program is committed to supporting immigrant and undocumented students through offering advice and additional resources for them, as well as fostering and promoting peer-to-peer encouragement. The interactions and relationships within this program were particularly affirming to Melinda as an undocumented student:

Melinda: The one program that actually reached out to me and contacted me is the Immigrant Services Program where I'm working now. The director contacted me and she said, "I noticed in your profile that you're an immigrant student, how are things going"? . . . I feel like they not only help students with the financial aid staff, but also with their self-esteem—just letting them know they're not the only ones out there.

Melinda: The Immigrant Services Program was very helpful. If they had not reached out to me, I don't know what I'd be doing right now.

Similar to Melinda's experience, Emiliano describes how his professors took the initiative to connect with their students:

Emiliano: Before the class even started, some professors would even call you and would remind you. For example, my computer systems class, the professor called and left a message saying, "This is [professor's name]. I'm just calling to check on you, and to verify you've received my syllabus, and if you've already read the first night assignment and everything is clear, and if it's not, please give me a call.

Out-of-class validation. Out-of-class validating agents can include family members, significant others, friends, and college staff. Although all students experienced extensive out-of-class validation from family members, friends, and faculty, this was not the case in regards to staff. For instance, all five students considered staff, such as registrar and financial aid, were not supportive or understanding like their professors. Emiliano described his experience with a staff member of the registrar's office as humiliating when he was told he was lucky the university allowed him to register for

classes without upfront payment as an undocumented student. Sofía shared she felt she was scolded “*me estaba regañando*” (she was scolding me) by a registrar’s office staff member when she attempted to obtain a copy of her transcript, and the staff member noticed she had an overdue tuition balance.

Although the participants encountered some invalidating experiences from non-faculty staff, these were by far outnumbered by the academic and interpersonal validating experiences received in their schools. In addition to extensive validation from faculty, all five students experienced vast academic and interpersonal validation from family members and mentors.

Out-of-class academic validation. Emiliano spoke about three very important people in his life:

Emiliano: So having them [his mentors] in my life... to some extent they took on my mom’s responsibility as far as like asking questions such as, how is school? How are you doing? Do you need any help—do you need to talk to your advisor? Are you failing any classes? They were always kind of on top. And it was weird, but they treated me as if I was part of their family. For graduation they gave me some gifts. Just having them, I feel like not all of us have that.

I think I was lucky. I feel I was lucky because not only did I have this mentor who funded my education as an out-of-state student, as an international student, because that’s how I was paying. Having these teachers [two other mentors] that also at some point gave me money for books, or money for anything for school.

For the other four students, the most common out-of class academic validating agents were their parents, and/or other immediate family members. These agents had a significant impact on their college success:

Sofía: But my mom, she has always, always pushed us [her and her siblings] in education. Even now that I'm in college she's always like, "You better graduate. You better graduate." I'm like, "*ay mom*" (laughs). So I think my mom. My mom would be the person, and of course my sister because I saw her struggles in her success [college graduation]. . . I wanted to do the same thing as my older sister. First of all, I think my parents are a big reason why I have succeeded because they are the ones who have motivated me every semester when I'm, like I said, my midterms, those are the hardest days of my life (laughs), and my parents are like, "*o no, ya mero acabas hija, échale ganas ya mero acabas. Otro año más*" (oh no, you are almost finished, baby; keep it up, you are almost finished. One more year).

Sofía: My mom, I actually think she's the person who pushed me the most. Like I said, we had no option first of all, that's how she made it seem. But my mom always pushed us; she knew about our immigration status but she said, "even if you take one class at a time, you're not going to stop school, you are going to go to school."

Raúl: I guess all the help that I have received from my family, my friends, my professors. They've all inspired me to believe in myself and progress through it [college]. They inspire me by telling me they're proud of me.

Susana: I had my sponsors, and I know there are people believing in me. My priority was my mom. I always thought about my mom, that she wanted me to have good grades. I couldn't let her down.

Melinda: Obviously it's a given that my parents were those significant people because they have always supported me. They have always told me, "even if you don't go right away [to college], we will help you so you can go later on." They've always wanted me to go beyond their education.

Out-of-class interpersonal validation. Student interpersonal validation is not limited to in-class agents. Out-of-class agents play a key role in validating students as individuals. For instance, Emiliano defines himself as fortunate to have found key people in his life who offered him unconditional support, and had "faith" in him:

Emiliano: So that's why I ended up going to college because he [CEO at his employment company] said, "I have faith in you, I know you can do it." I have three mentors that are very important to me, the owner of the company I work for, and then I have to middle school teachers.

Emiliano: So again, having those people [his mentors] and knowing that I couldn't let them down. I was like, "I have to do really well. My only option is to

do well because not only are they putting their money into my education, they really have faith in me, and failing is not an option for me.”

Sofía, Raúl and Melinda shared how their family members served as out-of-class interpersonal validating agents who offered their love and support when they needed it the most:

Sofía: My mom and my sister were always calling me and talking to me on the phone [during midterms and finals], so that helped a lot.

Raúl: Yes, I’ve called [his family] and said that I don’t want to do this anymore, and they remind me that I’m almost done. Not this semester, but the last semester was really stressful for me. I called my mom and I said, “I just want to go home already.” She reminded me I’m almost done, not to worry, that I have only three semesters left. To just push through it, that it will be worth it. I like that they support me because we’re always talking to each other at least once a week.

Melinda: My parents have influenced me to keep working hard, to focus on school first, and then my job and other things. They always tell me, “don’t worry about money to pay bills, focus on your school and we will handle the rest.”

Melinda: Like I’ve mentioned before, my parents have given me that support, that love I need. “Yeah, Linda you can do this,” and just given me the opportunity to be a student first, and then a member of the family who needs to contribute, second. So just that love and support.

The academic and interpersonal validation the participants received both in-and-out-of class seemed to provide a counter-balance that they needed to persevere through the daunting status barriers. Susana referred to herself as lucky to have developed relationships with certain professors who consistently provided words of encouragement, and who eventually became prominent mentors in her life. Melinda stated that she did not know where she would be if the Immigrant Services Program had not reached out providing the validation she needed to navigate the college system. Two-way validation positively impacted each of the participants' persistence in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Theme 5. Social Reform

The theme of social reform emerged as all five students shared how the awareness of their undocumented status and its impacts, inspired a desire in them to help others in a similar situation, and to advocate for social reform. Although the participants advocate in different settings and through distinctive approaches (e.g., clubs, organizations, work place, programs, and rallies), all five of them seek out opportunities to advocate for themselves, and take action for true change for the entire undocumented population.

For most of the participants, high school served as the setting for the beginning of their activism in an effort to unite and organize to change their status. They aspired to a permanent legal status for them, their families, and other undocumented students, thus they became the force that could change their current and future situation:

Sofía: I was just getting more educated- a few of my friends and I, from school, got involved in an organization that was started. From my organization I started to meet with organizations that work on immigrant issues so I was more aware of what resources I didn't get.

Susana: And I was really involved with my community my senior and junior year in high school, and that also motivated me to go to college.

Melinda: [In high school] I did about 400 hours of community service working with students, parents and teachers at a local elementary school.

Although for these three participants in particular, the desire to advocate for themselves, make a difference, and begin to change their current and future reality began in high school, their activism intensified in college.

Sofía, Susana and Melinda became part of their colleges' organizations that advocate for the rights of immigrants. Susana and Sofía became key leaders in their organizations, which focused on undocumented issues and immigration reform:

Sofía: There [at her university] were a lot of undocumented students and that's what drove me into doing what I'm doing now, being part of a movement, which is the immigrant movement. Seeing how many injustices we were going through just in our university, and just my group of friends. I was like, "f*#%, if we're going through this, I'm pretty sure there is more of us."

Susana: My freshman year in college I got really involved, my second semester I was very involved in the immigrant movement . . . Which helped changed a lot of things within the school for undocumented students. So, that's how I got to work with a lot of staff, the student Dean, and some of the faculty at [university]. So everybody knew the type of work we were doing and the majority of them were very supportive.

Both Sofía and Susana are currently active immigrant movement leaders at the local, state and national level organizing and uniting with others to defend their rights:

Sofía: We have conferences once a year where we all get together. We [Dreamers in Action members] all get together, and we see what we're doing locally [town], and what we are doing state-wide, and how we can all help each other . . .

Melinda currently works for an organization at her university that offers support to immigrant students. As a new student to this institution, the organization reached out to her as an immigrant student; which was extremely helpful to Melinda. She is now providing this support to other students.

So you get the academic and financial support and resources, but you also get to make connections with other students like yourself. We bound, and we exchange information, and we help each other: "you know, we can do this," and "we can do this together."

Similarly to Melinda, Sofía united with other undocumented leaders seeking to transform their reality and that of other undocumented individuals. Sofía takes pride on what she

and her organization have accomplished in their effort to move forward towards social reform:

If there are any deportations going on, like from one of our organizers or some other family that they know, they send a text message to everyone, everyone who is part of the organization, which there's so many of us, and we just keep calling and keep annoying the s*#% out of them [immigration officials] (laughs) until we can stop that deportation. We've stopped so many deportations like that.

All five participants of the study disclosed their desire to help people in their situation. Although some of them are already doing this work through formal organizations they belong to, all participants plan to use their degrees to help others. Sofía, Raúl and Melinda altered their career goals to areas where they will have the opportunity to positively impact their communities. They were students who experienced the power of validation first hand and now wish to become validators of others through careers that can provide a platform for social reform to take place. When Sofía was in high school she wanted to go into the area of forensics. She is currently majoring in social work. Raúl intended to go into the field of psychology; he will soon graduate with a degree in social work. Melinda started her college career in pre-veterinary medicine. She is now majoring in human services.

Melinda altered her career goals from veterinary medicine to human services because she views the human services field as a way to give back to her community and help other students and families in her situation. When she transferred to her current university she was grateful the Immigrant Services Program contacted her. Her positive

experience with the program motivated her to now become that individual who reaches out to others in similar circumstances. Melinda's college experiences have empowered her to become a change agent seeking to promote change for more people. With regards to her plans after graduation, she shared:

I would definitely like to stay here in the community and help families and students like myself. I feel I have the experience and knowledge to be able to push them forward I would love to work with students and immigrants and their families through the high school or the college process as well. I want to use my degree to help people.

Emiliano graduated with a degree in marketing. He expressed a desire to work for a nonprofit organization where he can support small businesses, particularly in the Hispanic community, to assist them in the entrepreneurship journey. He expressed a desire to have a more "meaningful life" and work in a place where he can make a difference: "I have friends who work in nonprofit and they're not making tons of money. But they're making a ton of difference and that means the most to me, to make a difference."

Susana double majored in Spanish and media arts. During her first two years of college, her courses focused on her Spanish major. It is through the Spanish classes she became highly involved in a club that advocated for the rights of immigrants. She was the president of the club for two years making important changes in favor of the immigrant and the undocumented student population on her campus. For instance:

Office staff were giving inaccurate information; they were not educated at all on the undocumented, and they were rejecting students because they were undocumented. But the MEChA club started meeting with them to help them understand the undocumented issues, and we made very positive changes there. The last two years of college, her studies focused on the media arts major. She utilized her new skill set to continue her advocacy:

So when I went into the media arts, I had to change my organizing [immigrant movement] to do like “arts activism.” I started using my media arts skills for the same cause. So every class I had, I was always doing posters of undocumented issues. I did a video or a series of videos of people crossing the borders.

As a recent college graduate, Susana remains committed to being a change agent among the undocumented community. She works for a nonprofit organization that is in favor of the immigrant community. She also continues to use her media arts degree to advocate for and serve as a voice to the undocumented population, as well as the LGBTQ population:

I found a reason to travel and show my work and I did a whole tour, and they [professors] were really shocked with my organizing skills and all the things I was doing. So what I did is I had banners like 6’ x 3’ and *se llama*, it’s called, “*Jotería* (“Gayness”) Undocumented.” So, with those banners I did workshops about the LGBTQ struggles and the undocumented struggles, and how these two identities intersect.

This passion for social reform began prior to college; for most of the participants, during high school when the true impact of their undocumented status surfaced. Nonetheless, all five students shared a desire to take action about their circumstances, to which they referred to as “unfair.” Once the participants became fully aware of their legal status and its implications, this awareness sparked a vested interest in social reform.

Summary

This chapter was divided into two sections. The first section presented the individual portraits of five participants recounting the experiences that influenced them to persist in their pursuit to obtain a bachelor’s degree. The portraits were constructed following the dimensions of conception, structure, form and cohesion as described in Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ (1997) portraiture methodology.

The second section presented and discussed the five overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis: High School: Gateway to Awareness, Undocumented Status Barriers, Deflected Futures, Two-Way Validation and Social Reform.

Chapter Five presents a discussion of the five themes, the significance and limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for educational leaders as well as for future researchers.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to offer insights to educational leaders on the in- and out-of-class validating experiences that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. More specifically, the study sought to uncover the specific faculty actions, such as academic support, curriculum and class structures that validated the students in class, and the specific actions and encouraging statements that validated the students interpersonally out of class.

Two questions were crafted to guide this study and to establish the scope of the research.

Question 1: How do undocumented students' in-class experiences, such as curriculum, classroom, and faculty interactions, influence their college persistence?

Rendón (2002) states the first element of validation places the responsibility on the validating agents (e.g., faculty) for initiating the contact, and deems critical they reach out to students as opposed to expecting them to ask questions first (p. 16). When asked to discuss in-class experiences with regards to curriculum, class structure, and faculty-student relationships, all of the participants shared a plethora of faculty-initiated experiences that validated them as students and as individuals. The following are

examples of academic and personal validation the participants experienced on their campus:

- Syllabus based on student interest/relevancy
- Culture-focused curriculum
- Student participation encouraged in class
- Group projects that foster peer interactions
- Students' backgrounds and perspectives valued
- Professors reaching out to students to provide support to students
- Equal treatment of all students
- Professors believe in students
- Professors as mentors
- Faculty open to receive training from students regarding undocumented status issues

The in-class validation experiences influenced the persistence of this group of undocumented students by providing the critical support they needed while away from home. All participants, with the exception of one, are first-generation college students. In an unfamiliar environment, and for most of them away from home for the first time, the sense of community and family environment that was created at the colleges played a critical role in the students persisting through college. Students talked about professors serving as mentors who motivated them, believed in them, and came to know them at a personal level. Susana specifically spoke that although she was the only Mexican student in her major's department, she found it validating that her professors knew her and cared

about her as a person, not just as a student. Emiliano mentioned several times how professors at his university reached out to him, and how he was consistently affirmed for his ideas and perspectives. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) assert such statements of “affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation” increase students’ motivation to succeed (p. 17).

Nontraditional students who have experienced extensive invalidation, as Emiliano did prior to entering his current university, believe they do not possess the ability nor the intelligence to be college students. The academic and personal validation the participants received counter-balanced any invalidating experiences, allowing them a renewed sense of belief in themselves as individuals, a belief they have the capability to learn, to thrive and to succeed. The in-class academic and interpersonal validation this group of undocumented students received is one of two main factors for their persistence in college completion.

Question 2: How do undocumented students’ out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, influence their college persistence? The interpersonal interactions and the involvement in the social reform movement of these students, validated them and empowered them as individuals. Student interpersonal validation is not limited to in-class agents, out-of-class agents play a fundamental role in fostering students’ personal development and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). The interpersonal interactions out of class validated the students and contributed to their college persistence. The participants described numerous experiences of interpersonal

interactions that provided validation. The following are a few examples of validating out-of-class interactions they experienced from family members, mentors and professors:

- People have faith in them as students
- Family and mentors provide statements of encouragement
- People believe in them as individuals and as students
- Mentors see the potential in them
- Foundations provide mentors and financial support
- Family provide support systems
- Mentors inquire about their education (e.g., classes, grades)
- Faculty motivate and support them as social change agents
- Professor reach out outside of class

With the exception to Emiliano and Susana, interpersonal interactions came mainly from the participant's families. Emiliano spoke extensively about the academic and interpersonal validation received from his three mentors that he knew outside of the university. He spoke about the words of encouragement, the faith they had in him, and how part of his drive to accomplish his goals was because he felt he owed it to his mentors. Similarly, his professors became significant motivators and mentors outside of the classroom, which furthered validated Emiliano as an individual. Susana experienced significant validation from the Dream Foundations mentors who supported her academically and interpersonally from the time she was in elementary school.

The participants' portraits are filled with endless examples of validation statements they received from out-of-class validating agents. Statements such as, "you

can do it,” “I believe in you,” and “we have faith in you,” consistently appeared throughout the data. These statements were particularly helpful for the participants who left home to go to college; they all expressed they experienced homesickness, and in some moments they were ready to give up. In all instances, it was family validation that kept them going.

The participants also spoke about their desire to be successful for their validators. Statements such as, “I cannot let them down,” “I’m so grateful for my sponsors,” “my sponsors are counting on me,” and “I want to do it [finish college] for them [sponsors],” also appeared consistently throughout the data. All five participants mentioned desiring to be successful for their parent(s) as a demonstration of their gratitude for their sacrifices, their work, and in most instances, for their steadfast support and validation.

A number of studies have noted that immigrant and other marginalized student groups have a commitment to education as well as civic participation resulting in a positive impact on them as individuals and students (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortez, 2010; Perez, 2011; Rosas, 2010; Graham, 2013; Chambers & Phelps, 1993). In this study, student involvement in social reform activism was a significant contributing force to the college persistence of the participants. Their desire to voice their perspectives and take action to ameliorate the implications of their status motivated them to access and persist in their college education. Similarly to other undocumented students (Gonzales, 2008), the participants have capitalized on the current immigration momentum and their own school experiences to organize in the community. Learning about their status led them to unite with other students in the same circumstance, and to organize with the

purpose of supporting each other, but more importantly, to take action to change their current and future legal situation. Freire (1970, 1993) refers to this theory of action as “unity of the leaders with the oppressed” engaging in an untiring effort for unity among the oppressed in order to achieve liberation. Gildersleeve (2010; 2011) suggests incorporating the political within the educational supports student success and validates students “via the development of a critical consciousness about their own education in relationship to the broader society and their home communities” (2011, p. 90). All of the participants in this study have a desire to help people who face similar challenges, some formally through local, state and national organizations, and others in their current universities or communities; nonetheless, all with the same goal to move towards social reform.

The findings related to the research questions are consistent with Rendón’s (1994) theory of student validation. This group of undocumented students were able to believe in their inherent capacity to learn, feel part of the learning community, gain a sense of empowerment, and become successful college students (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011) as a result of the validation they experienced. However, this study’s results suggest this particular group of undocumented students required both in-class validating agents (e.g., faculty, academic staff, and peers) and out-of-class validating agents (e.g., family, mentors, other social reform activists) as essential to their persistence at different points of their college career. For instance, when students felt homesick and were ready to renounce to their goal of college completion, it was the family members’ and out-of-class mentors’ interpersonal validation that influenced them to persist. In regards to

academics, all participants expressed their parents were unable to provide assistance with academics (e.g., homework, essay-writing, midterms, course selection) due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the college system, and/or educational background. In such instances, these participants turned to and solely relied on in-class academic validation. As such, in- and out-of-class academic and interpersonal validation in the form of two-way validation and social reform, were the two primary forces that influenced this group of undocumented students' college persistence. These findings demonstrate nontraditional, minority students' college success does not hinge on assimilation to the dominant culture as suggested by Tinto's theory of student departure (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012), and that in fact they can "push back" on the dominant culture and attain their educational goals.

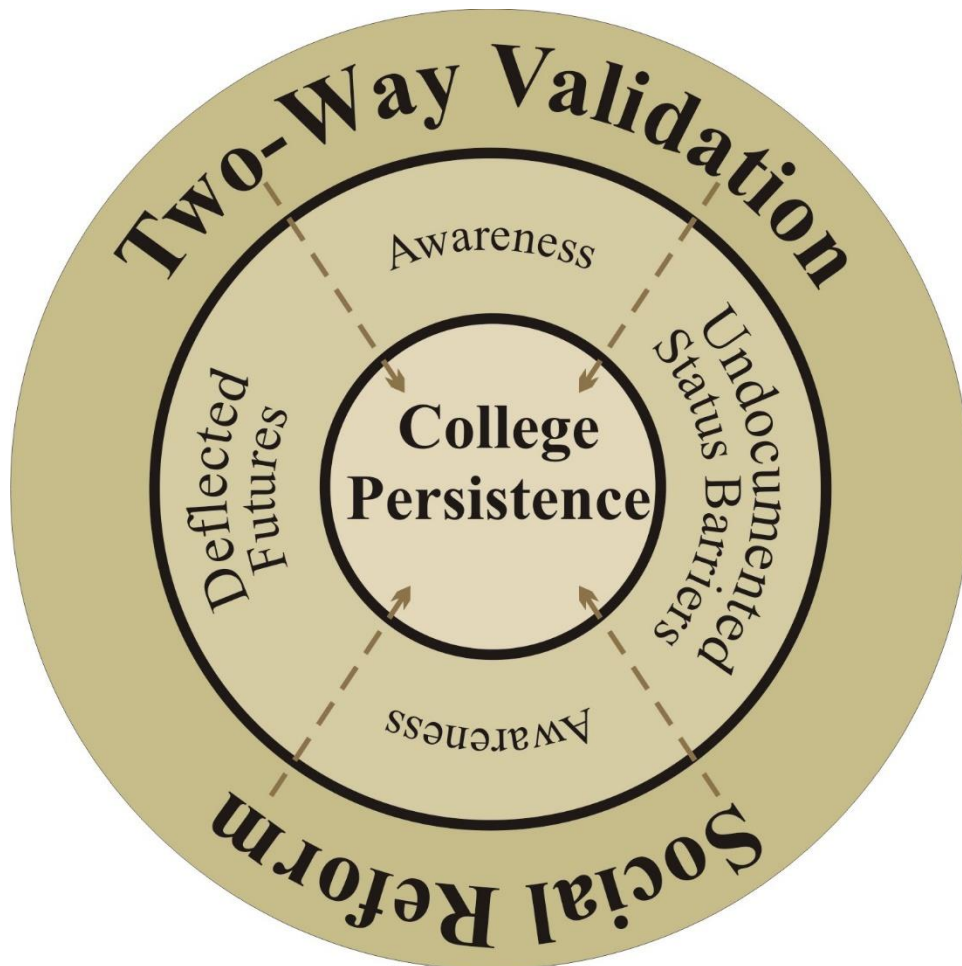
Discussion

The initial theory of action of this study was that the more educational leaders learn about how in- and out-of-class validation helps undocumented students to access and persist in college, the more prepared they can be to serve this population. Instead of offering strategies that led to their success, the participants' portraits were filled with emotion and personal experiences that reflected pain and barriers as well as passion and hope. The five major themes that emerged from their stories are clustered into two dimensions: the barriers these undocumented students faced, and the forces that helped penetrate those barriers resulting in college persistence. The first three themes, high school as a gateway to awareness, undocumented status barriers, and deflected futures,

validate the extant research while two-way validation and social reform, contribute to the extant research by further illuminating the contributing forces to college persistence.

The five participants encountered a point of status awareness during high school realizing the impacts of their undocumented status; they faced numerous barriers, and their futures were undeniably deflected. Two-way validation and social reform were the overpowering forces that penetrated though the undocumented status barriers and deflected futures resulting in college persistence. Figure 2 further illustrates this relationship.

Figure 2. Penetrating Forces to College Persistence

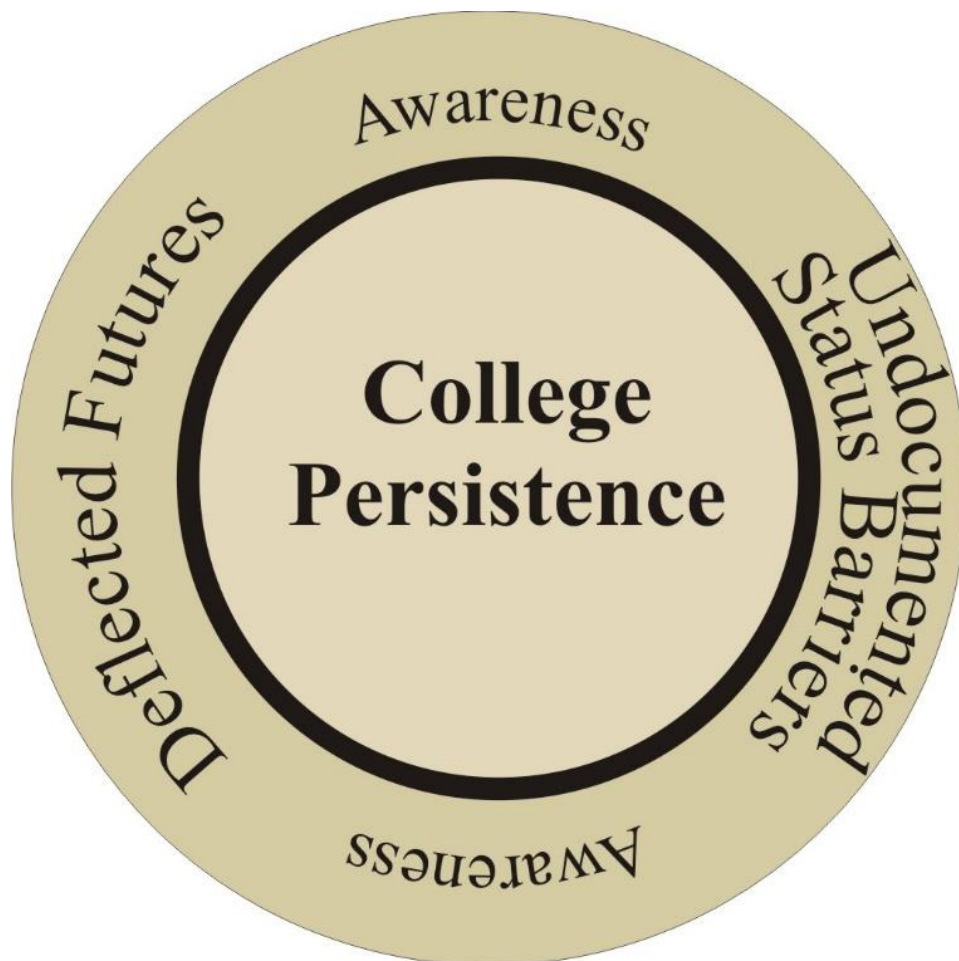


Two-way validation and social reform, served as the overpowering forces that penetrated through the disillusionment that these undocumented students experienced when contemplating post-secondary education. While the participants of this study represent many elements of the typical profile of the undocumented population, the unique difference that these five participants share is that they were all fortunate enough to have people in their lives who continuously validated them along with pathways for reforming current excluding educational and social systems. The experiences of two way validation and social reform opportunities impacted their ability to overcome the deterring forces and ultimately persist in college. Consistent with previous research (Corrunker, 2012; Gildersleeve, 2011; Gonzales, 2008; Unzueta Carrasco & Seif, 2014), the involvement of these students in social activism empowered them as individuals as well as students.

Although undocumented students face multiple social, economic, and legal barriers (Baum & Flores, 2011; Gonzales, 2009; Olivas, 2004), and their status threatens their futures, their involvement in social reform, in hope to change their current and future situation, can serve as a penetrating force to college persistence. Gildersleeve's (2011) neo-critical validation theory asserts that students' interrogation of power and agency generates a critical consciousness that affirms students of "their reading of the world and how they write themselves in it" (p. 79). Similar to Gildersleeve's (2011) findings, the activism of this study's students in pro of a permanent legal status in the near future, highly contributed to their success in accessing and completing college.

Implications of the participants' legal circumstance such as status barriers and deflected futures encompass the unfortunate deterrent realities of most undocumented students. Two-way validation and social reform transcend those realities making it possible for students to persist in college. When two-way validation and social reform are removed, what remains is the reality of the typical undocumented student (Figure 3). As a result, they are deterred and in most instances do not even attempt to access college.

Figure 3. Deterrents to College Persistence



The participants of this study have chosen to battle their reality. A reality that became apparent in high school, and now poses a threat to deflect their futures. They have empowered themselves to become change agents and social activists, rather than consenting to be the oppressed. The two-way validation from others has helped them persist despite the status barriers they have encountered. Therefore, the social reform opportunities and the validating experiences have been the penetrating forces to academic persistence.

Recommendations for Educational Institutions

Although the research questions focused on the in- and out-of-class validation that influenced a group of undocumented students to persist in college, there are many implications for practice within and beyond the scope of the questions. The following are proposed recommendations for educational leaders and secondary and post-secondary institutions.

The first implication relates directly to the gateway to awareness that students experienced during high school. When students began the college process, they realized the impacts of their undocumented status on their access to college. The participants turned to involvement in social reform as a vehicle to advocate for themselves, and seek change in their situation. More and more research suggests a need for effective school programs that address the cultural, social, and political contexts, and an approach that channels the power of youth to take action in their communities (Lewis-Charp, Yu, & Soukamneuth, 2006). This study suggests that if secondary schools are able to provide

guidance, opportunities, and a platform for students to engage in advocacy, the students might be better prepared to face and overcome the challenges ahead.

The second implication relates to college barriers due to an undocumented status. Limited financial support is one of the common barriers to college access (Baum & Flores, 2011; Olivas, 2004; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Since undocumented students do not qualify for federal financial aid, they must resort to scholarships and institutional financial aid to subsidize the cost of their college education. Some of the study's participants took the initiative to educate themselves regarding their status and how it affected them in regards to financial aid and college. The findings suggest that if high schools are informed about the resources available to this group of students, they can encourage more undocumented students to pursue a college education. Some beneficial information for both undocumented students and their parents includes: policies that affect this population (e.g., Colorado ASSET a bill that grants in-state tuition to qualifying undocumented students and DACA), available scholarships that do not require a Social Security number, a list of colleges that offer institutional financial aid, and a list of colleges and/or states that offer in-state tuition.

The third implication directly relates to Rendón's theory of student validation. Consistent with Rendón (1994), the findings of this study suggest administrators, staff and faculty of high schools and colleges serving undocumented students need to consider the use of this theory within the context of the classroom and the campus as an effective approach to influencing student persistence. As such, schools/colleges must train their administrators, faculty and staff on student validation practices in- and out-of-the

classroom in order to transform underserved students into “powerful learners who overcome past invalidation and oppression” (p. 28). For instance, student validation can be included as part of a yearly staff orientation and professional development throughout the school year, continuously measuring progress through student feedback. It is important to note the study found that none of the participants experienced validation from non-faculty staff. As such, it is essential all staff members are included in the professional development on the topic of student validation.

The last implication relates to the need for institutions to build an inclusive support system for undocumented students that encourages them to persist in their secondary and post-secondary goals. The study’s findings suggest students highly benefit from programs, clubs, and organizations that are commended with: reaching out to students, addressing student issues and needs, providing opportunities for student involvement and student leadership, fostering mentoring relationships, and promoting peer-to-peer interaction. According to the participants’ experiences, the most powerful clubs and organizations were those that were student-led with the guidance of a faculty member.

Participants’ recommendations. Each participant was asked how to improve the college experience for undocumented students. The following is a collective list of structures and practices this group of students considered as key to improving the college experience for undocumented students:

- Professors reach out to students. For instance, before the first class, professors need to introduce themselves to their students. The participants perceived

“reaching out” as professors caring about them, and helping to prepare them for a successful semester.

- The professors, staff, and administrators are knowledgeable about the undocumented population and their needs, and offer accurate information about resources (e.g., academic, financial, legal, and informational) available for this population.
- Professors are open and willing to get to know their students at the personal level (students are validated as individuals and not just as students).
- Professors and staff mentor, support, and provide the platform for students seeking involvement in organizational activism towards social reform.
- The staff is sensitive to undocumented individuals’ circumstances. They understand the unique challenges of undocumented students. (i.e., ineligible for financial aid).
- The staff’s (e.g., admissions, registrar, and financial aid) actions and interactions convey a sense of openness and acceptance toward immigrant and undocumented students.
- The institution’s practices and structures (e.g., curriculum, family orientation/events, and extracurricular activities) convey a sense of openness and acceptance toward immigrant and undocumented students.
- The institution actively promotes peer interaction through student activities.
- The institution provides student services (e.g., tutoring center) that foster and promote student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

This study revealed the need for expanded research to further explore the life experiences of undocumented students. The following list contains ideas for further research:

1. Qualitative research on the experiences of undocumented students on a broader geographical scale since this study only addressed students in Colorado. This research could include participants who did and did not persist in college.
2. Case study of one or multiple institution for in-depth exploration of the current practices, and further insight into the specific next steps for fostering a validating environment for the undocumented student population.
3. Research on student validation with other underrepresented groups such as the gay and lesbian population. Rendón (1994) posits validation is essential for nontraditional and underserved students. Specific research with other underserved populations can contribute to the current research.
4. Research on how the awareness of the impact of legal status, particularly regarding college access and persistence, can inspire a desire in undocumented students to become leaders in the social reform movement (i.e., immigration reform movement and helping others in a similar situation).
5. Research on the college persistence of undocumented students who are not Hispanic. This study focused only on Hispanic undocumented students that shared a similar profile (e.g., low economic status and first-generation college

students). Research on undocumented students with different profiles due to different ethnic backgrounds is needed to make generalizations about undocumented students and college attainment.

6. Research on the after-college life of students who obtained a deferred status through DACA to examine how they persist to become successful professionals.

Limitations

There are a few limitations for consideration in this study. One limitation is the study is not generalizable to other populations outside of this study. The study included only one small sample size from a handful of universities. As such, it is not possible to make generalizations or identify patterns without broader research. Another limitation is that the students' responses may have been influenced by external factors such as fear of exposure of their identity despite the anonymity and confidentiality measures taken by the researcher. The researcher assumed participants responded openly, honestly, and as accurately as possible to the interview questions.

Despite these limitations, the stories of these undocumented students who have been successful navigating the college environment inform the general public about their value and strengths as well as leaders of educational institutions.

Final Remarks

Emiliano, Sofía, Raúl, Susana and Melinda have experienced many moments of invalidation through barriers, challenges, exclusion, and discouragement; however, there is no doubt the academic and interpersonal validation they received overpowered these

negative experiences and they became empowered to become students who persisted in completing college. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) portraiture methodology seeks "to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart" (p. 243); it is hoped this study was able to evoke the reader and compel emotional response (Ellis & Bochner as cited in Lyman, Lazaridou, & Strachan, 2012). It is also hoped the researcher was able to do justice to the amazing stories of this group of persistent, successful college students who, despite the odds, are reaching their goals. They all expressed a desire for people to know their stories, because they believe, "it changes people's thinking" about the undocumented population to one of motivated contributors to society. Similarly, they collectively advocate for a legal change that will not only benefit them, but their families, particularly their parents who, as Sofia stated, are the "true dreamers."

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Hispanic Volunteers Needed

A Doctoral Student Needs Your Help!

\$60.00 Compensation

I am a Mexican-American doctoral student, from the University of Denver, who is conducting research to learn from the experiences of undocumented college students. Participation in the study should take about three hours of your time and would involve responding to questions about your personal and educational background, and your in- and out-of-class experiences in college.

Please contact me if you meet the criteria below:

- **Your legal status is undocumented
(currently or at the time you attended college)**
- **You are in your last year of obtaining a bachelor's degree, or you
obtained one within the last two years**
- **You graduated from a Colorado high school**

Your educational and life experiences can help colleges and universities learn how to better serve you!

All information will be confidential.

For more information, please contact Erica García at
720-000-0000 or ericaloera@hotmail.com

Appendix B

Letter of Information to Potential Participants

Dear Participant,

My name is Erica García, and I am a researcher from the University of Denver in the Educational Leadership Department. I am conducting a research study on the in- and out-of-class experiences undocumented students feel validate them as students and influence their college persistence. The title of my study is *The experiences of undocumented college students through critical evocative portraiture*.

You are receiving this letter because you are a Hispanic undocumented college student in your last year of college or a recent college graduate, and you have expressed interest in participating in response to the flyer posted on Facebook. I invite you to participate in this study that will offer insights to educational institutions, particularly post-secondary, on the in- and out-of-class experiences that undocumented students believe influenced them to persist in their pursuit of a college degree. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in three one-on-one 60-minute interviews at a location convenient to you. The first interview will focus on getting to know your background, first school experiences as an immigrant, and your journey to college access. The second and third interviews will focus on your in- and-out-of class experiences as a college student, and the experiences you feel validated you and influenced you to persist in your pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Please keep in mind you are free to decline to answer any questions at any time, and pause or completely stop participation at any time. All interviews will be digitally recorded and I will transcribe all recordings. The information you provide will be used to create a portrait of you and your experiences. Upon completion of your portrait, you will have the opportunity to fully review the portrait to ensure all the information contained within has been portrayed accurately, and to your satisfaction. At this time, you will be asked for final approval to include your portrait in the study.

Because I understand the sensitivity of the nature of an undocumented status, please know that I will do everything within my possibilities to keep your identity anonymous. You will choose a pseudonym to use in your portrait, and the college or university you attend or attended will also be referred to using a pseudonym. Only I will have access to your data, and as such to your identity. Digital recordings, transcriptions, and electronic data collection will be kept confidential in a locked file cabinet at all times. All data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

The compensation for your participation in this study is a \$60.00 cash stipend. If for any reason you choose to withdraw from the study, you will receive your stipend at that time. The benefit for you as a participant, and for other undocumented students, is the general population, particularly educational institutions, will gain insight into your experiences

and needs through your individual and collective stories of the other participants. The aim is that these insights will assist institutions to better serve the undocumented population.

If you agree to participate, please return the attached Study Participation Form before we set our first interview session. As previously stated, you are free to stop participation in this study at any time. If you have any questions before you decide to take part in this study, or at any point during the study, please contact me at 720-295-9670 or ericaloera@hotmail.com. If you have any further questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may contact the Office for Research Compliance by emailing du-irb@du.edu, calling 303-871-4050 or in writing (University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121).

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Erica García', with a stylized, flowing script.

Erica García

Appendix C

Study Participation Form

Study:

The experiences of undocumented college students through critical evocative portraiture

Participation

_____ Yes, I am interested in participating in the above study. I understand I will receive a \$60.00 cash stipend for my time. I understand I reserve the right to stop my participation in this study for any reason without affecting my compensation.

_____ No, I am not interested in participating in the above study.

Please return this form before our first interview meeting.

Thank you for your time and considerations. I look forward to the opportunity to learn from you. Please call me at 720-000-0000 or email me at ericaloera@hotmail.com if you have any questions, and to set up our first interview.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Erica García', with a stylized, cursive script.

Erica García

Appendix D

Consent Form

Project Title: The Experiences of Undocumented College Students through Critical Evocative Portraiture

Principal Investigator: Erica García

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Susan Korach

DU IRB Protocol #: 569109-2

You are invited to participate in a research study about the in- and out-of-class validation experiences that undocumented students believe influenced them to persist in their pursuit of a college degree. You are being asked to be in this research study because you are a Hispanic undocumented college student in your last year of college or a recent college graduate, and you have expressed interest in participating in response to the flyer posted on Facebook.

This form provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part. If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in three one-on-one 60-minute interviews at a location convenient to you. The first interview will focus on getting to know your background, first school experiences as an immigrant, and your journey to college access. The second and third interviews will focus on your in- and out-of-class experiences as a college student, and the experiences you feel validated you and influenced you to persist in your pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

There are risks in participating in this study. The researcher has taken steps to minimize the risks of this study; however, you may still experience some risks related to your participation, even when the researcher is careful to avoid them. The main risk is you may be identified as an undocumented individual. Although the reported information will not include direct identifiers, it is still very possible your identity and as such your undocumented status can be uncovered. Other risks include the possibility of some discomfort. For instance, emotional discomfort as you remember experiences that may potentially cause you emotional distress. You have the right to pause, or completely stop the interview at any time as well as to decline to answer any of the questions. Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to participate now, you may change your mind and end your participation at any time. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed.

This study is designed for the researcher to learn more about the in- and out-of-class experiences that undocumented students believe influenced them to persist in their pursuit of a college degree. The benefit for you as a participant, and for other

undocumented students, is that the general population, particularly post-secondary institutions, will gain insight into your experiences and needs through your individual and the collective stories of you and the other participants. The aim is that these insights will assist these institutions to better serve the undocumented population.

You will receive a \$60.00 cash stipend for participating in this study. If for any reason you choose to withdraw from the study, you will receive your stipend at that time. You will not be expected to pay any costs related to the study. You will be expected to pay for your own transportation, parking, or child care, if needed.

To keep your information safe, the researcher will ensure your name is not attached to any reported data; a pseudonym will be used instead. The data will be kept on a password-protected computer at all times using special software that scrambles the information so that no one can read it. All hard-copy data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home, and will be kept for three years after the completion of the study. At this time, all data will be erased and/or destroyed. The original recordings of the interviews will be erased immediately after they are transcribed.

Although the researcher will do everything possible to keep your records a secret, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Also, if you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies. If we get a court order to turn over your study records, we will have to do that.

The researcher carrying out this study is Erica García. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call the researcher at ----. If she cannot be reached, or if you would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about; (1) questions, concerns or complaints regarding this study, (2) research participant rights, (3) research-related injuries, or (4) other human subjects issues, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may contact the Office for Research Compliance by emailing du-irb@du.edu, calling 303-871-4050 or in writing (University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121).

I have read this paper about the study and it has been verbally explained to me. I understand the risks and benefits of this study. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study; I will get a copy of this consent form.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please Print:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

___ I agree to be audiotaped.

___ I do not agree to be audiotaped.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Thank you very much for your interest in this study.

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

	QUESTIONS	PROBING or FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS
PERSONAL BACKGROUND	1) Tell me about you and your family. 2) When did you come to the US? 3) Tell me about your experience coming to the US. What were the circumstances? What was it like? 4) When did you realize your immigration status, and how did it affect you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where were you born? • How long did you live there? • Where else have you lived? • What is your family size? • What is the occupation of your parents/siblings? • What is the education level of your parents/siblings?
K-12 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	5) Tell me about your educational experiences-K-12. 6) What were your plans after high school? 7) What were your career goals and dreams as a child or as a young adult?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What grade were you in when you started school in the US? • What were your expectations of the U.S. school system? • How was reality compared to your expectations? • How was your experience compared to that of your country of origin?
COLLEGE BACKGROUND	8) How and when did you make your decision to go to college? Tell me about your experiences as you pursued higher education. What were your thoughts and feelings? 9) How did you decide to attend the college institution you are attending/attended? 10) What were your expectations of the college experience in general, and of your college? 11) How is/was the reality compared to your expectations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the significant events or people in your decision to go to college? In your transition to college? • What were the characteristics of your transition to college? • Was your undocumented status an obstacle? If so, how?

IN-CLASS EXPERIENCES	<p>12) Describe your relationship/interactions with faculty?</p> <p>13) Tell me about your experiences in the classroom? (i.e., with professors, peers, assignments, etc.)</p> <p>14) What do you think your professors think about you?</p> <p>15) Looking back over your whole life, can you tell me a real powerful learning experience that you've had in college?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What about the class structure format? • What do you think of the curriculum?
OUT-OF-CLASS (ON CAMPUS)	<p>16) Describe your experiences with any student services at your college?</p> <p>17) Describe your relationships/interactions with faculty outside of class time?</p> <p>18) Describe any extra-curricular activities at your college in which you are/were involved?</p> <p>19) What support staff or services have/did you utilize in your campus? (i.e., dean, registrar, tutoring/extra academic help).</p> <p>20) Tell me about your experiences with fellow classmates or with other students on campus?</p> <p>21) How do/did you feel when you come/came to your college and what makes/made you feel this way?</p> <p>22) What, if anything, has been/was the most or least helpful to you at your college?*</p> <p>23) How, if at all, has being here changed the way you think about yourself?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you seek out these services? • What do you do if you need extra help outside of class? • Do you play sports? Are you a member of a club? Do you attend sporting events or other activities? • What motivators do you think colleges should have? • Do you have any recommendations for improving students' experiences at your college?

OUT-OF-CLASS (OFF CAMPUS)	<p>24) Tell me about the influence of your family in your college success.</p> <p>25) Has anyone else influenced your college success?</p> <p>26) Has attending college affected your relationship with family or friends? If so, how?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role models? Motivators?
CLOSING QUESTIONS	<p>27) In your opinion, why do some students succeed when others fail?* What made you succeed?</p> <p>28) What is the most negative experience/hardships, if any, you have had to go through in order to go and complete college?</p> <p>29) What, if anything, did your institution do to you help you succeed? What about your family and friends?</p> <p>30) What is your graduation date?</p> <p>31) What are your plans for after graduation? (If already graduated- What are you doing now?</p> <p>32) What are your future aspirations?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does/will your legal status impact your plans? If so, how? • What are your hopes in regards to your legal status?

Appendix F

Initial Categories

Undocumented status college barriers (48) undocumented status employment barriers (25) undocumented status general barriers (34) **family college influence** (57) family lack of college support (10) **personal qualities** (58) emigration journey (29) use degree to help others/undoc. community (32) sharing undocumented status (20) culture and diversity validation (15) **adverse perceptions/emotions** (41) education-
positive effect on relationships (3) **key influences in college success** (74) education- adverse effect on relationships (10) **economic struggles** (37) **motivation from adverse experiences** (32) **validating peer relationships** (26) **student involvement** (47) college financial resources (13) family separation (12) experiences of verbal oppression (10) **personal accomplishments** (18) seeking a better life (19) family closeness (13) **supportive K-12 experiences** (33) confounding K-12 experiences (25) invalidating professor interactions (4) **validating campus environment** (60) **beyond validating professors** (131) **validating college in-class experiences** (37) undocumented population qualities (23) invalidating campus environment (19) positive perceptions/emotions (13) DACA-positive outlook (11) DACA-negative sentiments (8) **goals and aspirations** (48) overcoming obstacles (16) invalidating college in-class experiences (3) validating interactions with college staff (2) positive outcomes from college experience (22) family conflict (13) **academic accomplishments** (36) **invalidating interactions with college staff** (46) campus resources (31) exposure through undocumented stories (25) high school friendships (15)